

An unwritten narrative : the resilience of young Puerto Rican American girls

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Boston College

The Graduate School of Arts and Sciences

Department of Sociology

AN UNWRITTEN NARRATIVE: THE RESILIENCE OF YOUNG PUERTO RICAN
AMERICAN GIRLS

A Thesis

by

NATALIE ROSADO

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DEDICATION

I respectfully dedicate this to the beautiful young women who so generously allowed me to enter into their lives, and to my most important supporters, my family. Thank you.

“Who Am I?” By Rebekah Rosado

I am Strength,
But they try to disarm me.
Have me rest upon the soil, so frivolously.
And watch my veins tear
Through the dirt and bear the
Brightest fruit of the earth.
What is this about Mother of Pearl?
My labor has gone unnoticed.
Cut my body into pieces and sprinkle them over our Motherland.
Watch the seagulls devour my endless efforts.
The scraps of my body, fingers, toes, my bosom, will fall
I, too, have given myself up for my country
And its counterparts.
Hello Mother Earth what shall I do
Whilst my potential compiles?
Watch the seagulls
Rip my potential to shreds.
Selfish, greedy bastards never knew
What to do with themselves.
I will still be here,
Though,
I plan on still being here.
They try to disarm me,
But I tell them do not be fooled.
Because I am Strength.

ABSTRACT

AN UNWRITTEN NARRATIVE: THE RESILIENCE OF YOUNG PUERTO RICAN AMERICAN GIRLS

APRIL 2008

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This thesis focuses on the lived experiences of adolescent Puerto Rican American girls who were born and raised in the United States. In the midst of the social problems and the attention given to these problems, the resilient nature of these young women is often overlooked. The sample consist of 18 young ladies between the ages of 11-15 ($M = 12.2$ yrs). The data for this research project were collected through two main methods – the Bicultural Involvement Questionnaire (BIQ) and semi-structured interviews. First I utilize *social identity theory* and the concept of *social stigma* to detail certain social problems and explain their reactions towards them. I then describe the coping strategies used by these young ladies to survive the social inequality they face on a daily basis. I have used the existing research on the colonialism of Puerto Rico, race/ethnicity, and cultural gender expectations as the foundation for my exploration on the effects of the interconnectedness of all three social processes on the lives of these young girls, and to gain a better understanding on the coping strategies these young women use to deal with these social problems. Although these girls express many ways of dealing with difficult situations, I write on four of the main strategies they utilize. The four coping strategies include: making use of their social capital, distinguishing themselves from others, promoting and preserving cultural pride, and understanding the differences in various social contexts. What has remained virtually unwritten, until now, are the ways young puertorriqueñas have learned to cope with the problems of an oppressive history, race/ethnicity, and gender expectations.

“Campanitas de Cristal” lyrics by Rafael Hernández

Tilín, tilín, tilán.

*Oye que bonito es el tilín/ de mis campanitas de cristal/ Tilín, tilín, tilán/
Campanas que tañen para mí/ Tan dulce canción.*

Ding, Ding, Dong.

(How pretty is that ding/ From my crystal bells/ Ding, ding, dong/ Bells
that dong for me/ Such a sweet song.)

*Reir, reir, reir/ Lindas campanitas de cristal/ Que alegran mis horas de dolor/ Sonar, sonar,
sonar/ Solo para mí/ Solo para ti/ Campanitas de cristal.*

(Laugh, laugh, laugh/ Beautiful crystal bells/ That brighten up my hours of pain/ Sound, sound,
sound/ Only for me/ Only for you/ Crystal bells.)

One Saturday afternoon I asked my mother if she would not mind driving my new friend and me to the mall that was closer to my friend’s home. I had just started sixth grade at a middle school outside of my local district. My mother had worked for the county school system for a few years and knew which schools received more funding and therefore had the “better” teachers, fine arts programs, and general student bodies. Mary, the sixth grader who shared a table with me in homeroom, was fortunate enough to be attending her neighborhood school.

During the first two or three weeks Mary showed the appreciation she had for our budding friendship by offering me some helpful suggestions on things, such as the popular hair-dos and clothing stores. That Saturday my mother drove us and decided to stay with my brother until we were done shopping. While we were in a one of the many shoe stores my five year old brother decided to jump on a pile of shoe boxes, knocking them all on the floor. My frustrated mother pulled him out of the mess of shoes and yelled at the top of her lungs “*Te dije que te quedas quieto. ¡No te puedo llevar a ningún sitio! ¿Que te pasa? ¡Pórtate bien!*” (I told you to stay still. I can’t take you anywhere! What is wrong with you? Behave!). Embarrassed by the reactions of the customers I turned to my mother, exclaimed “Why do you have to speak Spanish so loud? Please!” and stomped out of the store, leaving my mother with a crying child and my friend paying at the cash register. That was the last time my mother spoke in Spanish around me.

It was not until I entered college that I felt the effects of that Saturday’s incident. Because a high percentage of the students attending my middle and high schools were White, I was eager to begin interacting with Latinos/as, other than my family members, when I entered college. Although I had this growing interest in “my people” I decided to join a White sorority and quickly took upon the

nickname “the White Spanish girl.” I went along with the “innocent” mocking until I began to socialize more with the Latinos/as from my classes. I quickly became fascinated by how much they cherished their language, heritage, family, cultural practices, and food. These factors may not *always* be used by others to define who they are, but I not only felt disconnected from these Latinos/as, I also felt a sense of disappointment and confusion. I wanted nothing more than to identify, once and for all, my true self.

INTRODUCTION

The inspiration for my research interest was shaped by my personal struggles, observations, and experiences. I was eager to converse with other young puertorriqueñas and provide them the opportunity to voice their opinions on the difficulties of life. I envisioned a paper that would cause people to become more aware of how difficult it could be for those who live their lives immersed in two distinct cultures. I admit that I entered this project with a personal agenda and was determined to bring to light what I thought deserved the most attention, their conflicts. Although I was fully aware of the problems that could possibly arise when qualitative research is approached with personal biases, I did not find this to be so problematic in my case because I had not only experienced problems of biculturalism first hand, but I have also extensively studied issues of race and identity throughout my college career.

After conversing with the first, then second, third, and fourth puertorriqueñas I examined the transcriptions for hours, a bit frustrated with the direction our conversations took. There were hardly any mentions of conflict and struggle in their stories. I then realized that these young women were telling me different stories; they were sharing personal accounts of strength, power, and resilience.

Rafael Hernandez was a Puerto Rican composer who wrote the song “Campanitas de Cristal”, from which the opening lines of this thesis were taken. These young women have learned to focus on the objects, the people, and the circumstances that help them create these

“sweet sounds.” Through our conversations together and the inspiration I received from their life stories I have been able to piece together their personal narrations in a way that I hope will do their lived experiences, as young Puerto Rican American women, justice. Before discussing the social problems that directly affect these young puertorriqueñas, I believe that it is necessary to first understand the larger social context in which they live.

The Latino population in the United States has rapidly grown within the last decade or so and continues to increase at an exceptionally fast pace. The pan-ethnic label *Hispanic* was created in the early 1970’s by the U.S. Bureau of the Census to unite the Spanish-speaking American population into one homogenous group – in hopes of making the collection of the census data a smoother process. The labels *Latino* and *Hispanic*, having been created and most often utilized by government agencies and American politicians for categorical purposes, have frequently caused frustration and confusion for Caribbean and Latin American groups. While most Latinos/Hispanics may share some common cultural characteristics, such as language, great variations among the experiences of the subgroups exist due to differences in legal status, socioeconomic status, and cultural stereotypes. Although pan-ethnic identifiers have been used by a number of activist groups as a way of stressing commonalities in order to create and perpetuate collective action, these labels also allow for generalizations of social problems and racial/ethnic stereotypes on a larger population (Gimenez 1989).

The position of Puerto Ricans differs from other immigrants in their unique colonial situation and the ambiguous status they occupy in the island’s relationship with the United States. They are the first group to come in large numbers with a different language and cultural practices and values who are, nevertheless, American citizens. Puerto Ricans continue to be the second largest Latino sub-group in the United States. In 2006 close to four million Latino

Americans categorized themselves as Puerto Rican. For the first time the number of Puerto Ricans living in America has exceeded the number of Puerto Ricans living on the island, 3,987,947 and 3,927,776 respectively (U.S. Bureau of the Census).

This thesis focuses on the lived experiences of adolescent Puerto Rican American girls who were born and raised in the United States. All of the participants will be referred to as Puerto Rican American, throughout this paper because, although they were born on the mainland, their familial roots stem from the Puerto Rican island. I have used the existing research/information on the colonialism of Puerto Rico, race/ethnicity, and cultural gender expectations as the foundation for my exploration on the effects of the interconnectedness of all three social processes on the lives of these young girls, and to gain an understanding on the coping strategies these young women use to deal with these social problems. For the purpose of this thesis, a postmodernist approach to social identity formation will be utilized; that is, a perspective which understands the formation process to be more of a multiple and relational one rather than one that is linear and ordered. In order to understand what exactly these young women have encountered, thus far, and the affects their experiences have had on the value they place on their roles as daughters, friends, and students there needs to be a general awareness of the existing social identities, i.e. ethnicity, race, and gender (Frable 1997; Howard 2000).

Having studied Latinos' thoughts on the categorical system (white/black/other) used by the Census Bureau, Clara Rodriguez (2000) argues that a large number of Hispanics chose "other" on the 2000 U.S. Census because the choices of "white" or "black" did not adequately represent all they considered race to encompass (skin color, nationality, familial birthplace). Similar to the problematic issues found in racially categorizing Latinos, many researchers have also recognized the process of ethnic identification as one that is a multilayered ball of confusion

because of its nonlinear and fluid nature. After studying American Indian identifications, Nagel (1996) explained ethnic identity formation as a continuous exchange of information between an individual's internal and external ascriptions. The ethnic terms *Hispanic* and *Latino* are often used to refer to people in the United States whose ancestry is from a Spanish speaking country (Oboler 1992). According to Tanya Golash-Boza (2006), "Hispanicity" is often equated with being foreign to the United States and could cause some level of frustration for Latino legal U.S. citizens and island born Puerto Ricans. "Many U.S.-born Latinos and Latinas report that when they are asked where they are from, the answer California or Texas only begets the well-known follow-up: "But, where are you *really* from?" While it is undeniable that African-Americans are also hyphenated Americans, people in the United States do not assume that blacks are foreigners, as they do for Hispanics" (Golash-Boza 2006:31). These young girls who have been raised in the United States but who continue to directly interact with the Puerto Rican culture of their ancestors (people, language, food, customs, etc.) are considered to be bicultural.¹ In many instances, the Latino, specifically Puerto Rican, and the American mainstream cultures have value and belief systems that have been found to cause "exclusionary and discriminatory practices" for bicultural children during certain social interactions (Zambrana 2002).

Similar to the way social theorists interpret the development of race and ethnic identities as constructions created through an interaction of the individual with their social environment, feminist philosopher Judith Butler (1986) adds to Simone de Beauvoir's theory of woman as the quintessential "other" by arguing that gender has become our society's way of appropriating cultural sanctions, prescriptions, and oppressive gender standards. Females in our male-driven society are constantly being alienated as not subjects, but objects, to be considered nothing more

¹ One of the methods used to gather the data for this research project was the Bicultural Involvement Questionnaire (BIQ). According to the results collected from the questionnaire all 18 girls are "bicultural." Therefore, my reference to these young women as "bicultural" is solely based on the results of the BIQ.

than the “others”.² I have chosen to specifically focus on young girls as opposed to both the male and female sexes because I would like to explore *specific* effects of biculturalism on young girls. Because most of the bicultural research has attempted to help bring this issue to the forefront of academia, direct attention to gender specific effects of biculturalism has not been provided by many contemporary researchers.

In constructing themselves as “subjects” and asserting these self-produced identities in the United States, these young ladies have to contend with all of the social challenges that attempt to classify and define them as an inferior group (e.g. uneducated, poor, foreign, passive.) Much of the literature on Latinos/Hispanics living in the United States focuses on the social problems of inequality and discrimination. Although these problems are absolutely real and *do* directly affect the lives of Puerto Ricans living in the United States. The reality of it all is, Puerto Ricans have been living in the United States for decades and have been able to survive as a national group, a culture, and a people. The young ladies that I was privileged to converse with are strong women who are dedicated to telling their stories, very compelling narratives of determination, endurance, and survival. In the midst of the social problems and the attention given to these challenges, the resilient nature of these young women is often overlooked. These young puertorriqueñas rightfully deserve to be recognized and praised for their passion and enthusiasm for life. In this thesis, I will accomplish two things: first I will utilize *social identity theory* and the concept of *social stigma* to detail certain social problems and explain their reactions towards them. I will then describe the coping strategies used by these young ladies to survive the social inequality they face on a daily basis.

² I have chosen to use the term “other(s)” to refer to those who are not Latinos/Hispanics/Puerto Ricans for the sole purpose of placing these young puertorriqueñas at the forefront of this thesis. Their identities as Latinas are constructed by a deep understanding of “who they are” (self) as well as “who they are not” (other).

LITERATURE REVIEW

When attempting to answer the question “*Who am I?*,” individuals may reference personal attributes, social groups to which they belong, and/or preferences of beliefs/values. Social psychologists have focused on investigating the effects of the social environment on the developmental process of an individual’s own self-concept and how that person chooses to self-identify. In order to effectively explore and begin to understand the actions, behaviors, and thoughts of a person, their immediate communities and extended social environments, from which interactions arise, must be investigated. According to social psychologist G. Herbert Mead, this ability to identify oneself as a separate individual, and refer to one’s distinctive characteristics, occurs through the recognition of others as objects and oneself as an object to others. “He becomes an object to himself only by taking the attitudes of other individuals toward himself within a social environment or context of experiment and behavior in which both he and they are involved” (Mead 220). Identity formation results from the internal negotiation of social behaviors, beliefs and values systematically learned and accumulated from the various social systems one belongs to. Identity is defined by social identity theorist Judith Howard (2000) as being comprised of social (social group memberships) and psychological dimensions (distinctive characteristics).

Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner 1996), explains individual identity formation as the process of multiple social group identities converging and informing the individual of who s/he is and how s/he should behave according to the social context. This is considered to be a continuous process. As one’s social environments and level of personal development changes, reevaluations of one’s memberships to/participation within certain social groups occur. Constant social exchanges allow individuals to determine which elements of their “self” are valued by

and/or shared with their social affiliates, and which components should be modified or rejected all together.

Unfortunately, for many ethnic and racial minorities and women, their behaviors, beliefs, and general nature are often found to be unimportant and devalued, thus muddling their process of identity formation.

As a point of transition, adolescence is heavily influenced by what comes before in addition to the effects of current experiences. It also undergirds the expected quality of the adult outcomes that follow. This transition occurs in particular contexts. When the effects of race and ethnicity are factored in, significant symbolic and structural variations become evident in both the quality of problems encountered and the objective outcomes experienced across settings (e.g. school and peer group) (Spencer 1983:366).

The socio-psychological significance of the achieved category of gender on identity formation hardly needs to be detailed. Black feminist Patricia Collins sees race/ethnicity, class, and gender as interlocking systems of oppression; the systems that at one time were viewed, and studied, as distinct structures. Although this shift in replacing the additive models of oppression has been made by many social scientists, there has been a limited amount of research that has used this idea of “interlocking systems of oppression” to explain the life experiences of adolescents.

These aspects become increasingly salient during adolescence because this period represents the developmental stage wherein insecurity about the ‘self’ characterizes the normative state of feelings and associated experiences for all adolescents, independent of their group’s unique cultural experiences or social status (Spencer 1983:368).

Identity Theory

The behaviors attributed to an individual who is “bicultural” were first mentioned in the social science literature as “dual culture personality.” In order to fully understand the behaviors of these bicultural young women under the *social identity theory*, the theory utilized to frame this

thesis, it is appropriate to begin with a historical overview of what is now referred to as “biculturalism.”

Assimilation

Assimilation is when a subordinate group acquires the beliefs, thought-patterns, and actions of the dominant group – a process many still believe is necessary in order to stabilize the relations between various racial/ethnic groups. According to American sociologist Robert Park, assimilation, more specifically, is “a process of interpenetration and fusion in which persons and groups acquire the memories, sentiments, and attitudes of persons or groups, and by *sharing* their experience and history are incorporated with them in a common cultural life [emphasis added]” (Park 1924:735). To paraphrase, replacement of the cherished customs, values, and lifestyle of the “barbaric” with those of the more “civilized and sophisticated” was expected to occur. *Assimilation* is the fourth stage of Park’s four-stage Race Relation Cycle which also includes *contact*, *competition*, and *accommodation*. Robert Park strongly believed that the American nation obtained its state of solidarity through its organized effort to develop a single national identity. His speculations included the belief that national unity was achieved only when immigrants were introduced, by the larger society, to the mainstream culture and, subsequently, embraced this way of living.

This idea of shedding one culture for another is referred to by many as either the “melting pot” theory or, the term I prefer over the former, the “Ellis Island” theory.³ The melting pot metaphor “makes assimilation a purely objective state, calling it a *“function of visibility”*: As soon as an immigrant exhibits no longer the marks which identify him as a member of an alien

³ In “The Melting Pot: Symbol of Fusion or Confusion?” Philip Gleason asks the question “Is the melting pot even a[n] [American] symbol?” (1996:21). Many people continue to refer to American society as a “melting pot” and feel as strongly about its existence as they do any other “American” symbol, such as the *American Dream*. Gleason argues that the custom of placing “melting pot” within quotations indicates its more theoretical nature.

group he acquires by that fact the actual if not the legal status of a native” (Hirsch 1943:36).

Believing, or rather *pretending*, that the final result of this “idealized” progression is an American “melting pot” is what I find most troubling. A “melting pot” connotes changes in *all* ingredients to form one element. Although Robert Park may have acknowledged and approved the use of the “melting pot” metaphor when characterizing his Race Relation Cycle, I’m certain he most definitely did not support actual changes in the host society.

“Ellis Island” should be the preferred term because it recognizes the Eurocentric nature of the assimilation theory. During the early 1900’s America witnessed a flood of immigrants predominately from southern and eastern European countries (Gleason 1964). The emphasis, placed by Park, on the “function of visibility” may provide an explanation for Irish, Italians, and Germans’ “success” (used loosely in this context) at achieving complete integration. Not being able to hide the mark of skin tone that automatically identifies them as part of a subordinate group; other migrants haven’t been as “successful.”

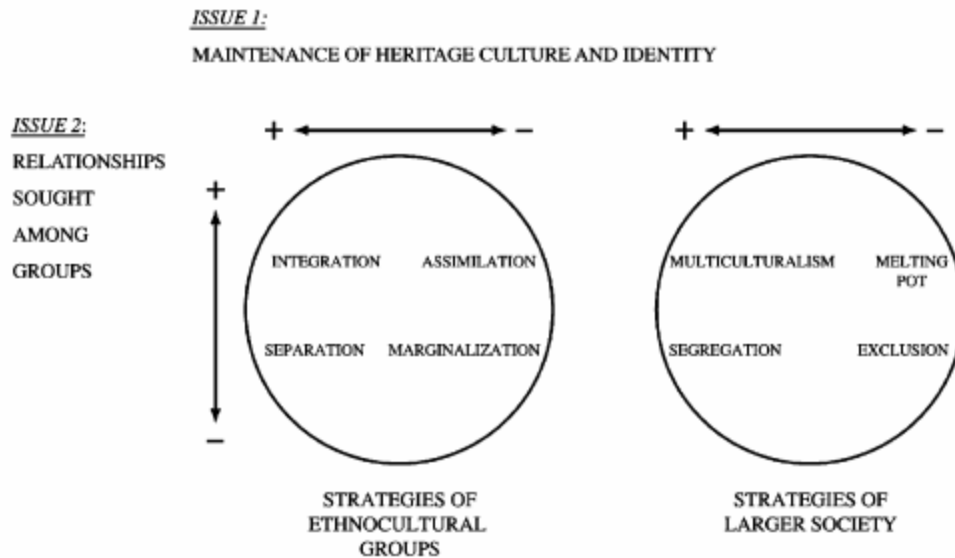
Acculturation

Robert Redfield was an American anthropologist who in the early 1930’s worked extensively with many small Latin American communities. He began observing how each individual village interacts with modernized societies during direct interchanges, such as the marketplace. Through these in-depth studies Redfield realized that the constant interaction of two cultures leads to three outcomes – one of which he titles *assimilation*. The three results are grouped under the umbrella term acculturation which he defines as “those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original cultural patterns of either or both groups” (Redfield 1936:149). Recognizing the receiving groups’ “power” to resist or accept one, most,

or all traits of the dominate group led to two other possible outcomes. The second is *Adaptation* “where both original and foreign traits are combined so as to produce a smoothly functioning cultural whole...with either a reworking of the patterns of the two cultures into a harmonious meaningful whole...or the retention of a series of more or less conflicting attitudes or points of view which are reconciled in everyday life” (152). The third is *Reaction* “where because of oppression, or because of the unforeseen results of the acceptance of foreign traits, contra-acculturative movements arise” (152). Redfield’s acculturation studies in Latin America initiated social science’s conversation on effects of transculturation other than *assimilation*.

Redfield’s approach is often referred to as the unidimensional model of acculturation. Strong mainland ties (assimilation) and strong ethnic ties (reaction) are the extremes of the acculturation continuum. The linear model assumes that the two cultural ties (or lack there of) are mutually exclusive. John Berry (2005) attaches a psychological dimension to the *acculturation theory* (cultural maintenance), as well as a second domain he introduces as *ethnic relations* (contact participation).⁴ Utilizing the two domains of acculturation and ethnic relations, Berry answers the question “How can peoples of different cultural backgrounds encounter each other, seek avenues of mutual understanding, negotiate and compromise on their initial positions, and achieve some degree of harmonious engagement?” by defining the four acculturation strategies represented in the diagram below:

⁴ “Cultural maintenance” refers to the degree to which cultural heritage of the migrant group is preserved and “contact participation” specifies the migrant group’s level of involvement in the cultural practices of the indigenous group.



The first part of the diagram (left hand circle) illustrates the four possible identity developments available to individuals who are members of the subordinate group. *Marginalized* individuals (low maintenance, low relations) maintain little interest in both the original and host cultures, and this, therefore, causes a rejection of both. *Separated* individuals (high maintenance, low relations) cherish their original culture and avoid direct interactions with members of the host society. *Assimilated* individuals (low maintenance, high relations) prefer to replace elements of their original culture with those of the new culture. *Integrated* individuals (high maintenance, high relations) desire to maintain their original identity while simultaneously interacting with and borrowing traits from the host group/society. “This formulation is from the perspective of non-dominant peoples, and is based on the assumption that such groups and their individual members have the freedom to choose how they want to acculturate. However this option is not always the case. When the dominant group enforces certain forms of acculturation, or constrains the choices of non-dominant groups, or individuals, then other terms need to be used” (Berry 2005:705). Often times, the dominant group is not concerned with mutual or reciprocal acculturation - influencing the nature of the acculturation process. The right circle

contains the terms used when the four possible outcomes are forced by the dominant group. Subsequent research has supported this linear model, on acculturation (e.g., Berry, Phinney, Sam & Vedder 2006).

Bicultural social transmission

Psychologist Amado Padilla's research focuses on the *socialization* of bicultural (integrated) adolescents, specifically second and later generations, and the role parents, peers, and institutions play in the formation of the adolescent's social character. Realizing that the demographic changes to America's population has accelerated in the last thirty-five years, due to an increase in immigration, Padilla argues against the use of earlier models of socialization (i.e. assimilation and acculturation); for they can no longer be applied to America's increasingly diverse population. It is essential to the study of psychosocial development that knowledge of the individual's home, language, culture, and social interactions be collectively considered.⁵ This "growing up" in a world where parents adhere to one culture while teachers and peers practice another is referred to as dual socialization, and the effects of dual socialization on the individual are considerably different for each generation (e.g. immigrants, second, third, etc.).

Padilla expands on Lambert's (1977) early attempt to separate biculturalism into two components - behavioral competence and affect towards both cultures. Padilla draws a distinction between cultural awareness and ethnic loyalty; where cultural awareness is defined as the "cognitive dimension that specifies the knowledge that a person possesses of their culture" and ethnic loyalty as "the behavioral component of the model that assess[es] a respondent's preferences regarding language, other forms of cultural expressions, leisure activities, and

⁵ Padilla shared this sentiment with sociologist Stow Persons (1987) who was critical of the Chicago sociologists (Robert Park included) who, according to Persons, were not only unsympathetic towards supporters of cultural pluralism, but also ignorantly believed that any form of cultural conflict would *always* result in assimilation.

friendships” (Padilla 2006:481). To identify the changes in cultural awareness and ethnic loyalty that occur for each passing generation, Padilla and Keefe (1987) conducted interviews in three distinct Mexican-American communities located in California. Results showed that cultural awareness decreased with each passing generation while the level of ethnic loyalty persisted across all generations. Quintana et al. (1999) found that adolescents who have a high amount of “ethnic perspective taking” not only become more aware of the social stigma surrounding their ethnic group but also learn to externalize the cause as ethnic prejudice as opposed to internalizing the root of the problem.

Padilla argues “that stigma and perceived discrimination are having effects that are different from what we might have anticipated...Perceived discrimination is serving to motivate ethnic group members to transmit their heritage knowledge from one generation to the next while also adopting English and the behavioral competencies necessary to become functioning members of an American culture to which they also belong” (Padilla 2006:494). According to contemporary psychosocial analysts, it is possible for an individual to create certain coping strategies that allow him/her to be immersed in two distinct cultures without experiencing the constant psychological conflict. In this paper I will build on this idea and identify the strategies these young Puerto Rican American women use to manage the conflicts they experience.

Social identity theory

In response to the identity theories that explain behavior by either focusing on individualistic explanations or solely acknowledging the group, Tajfel (1981) formed the idea of a group identity that concentrated on both the society and the individual. Thus, social identity theory links both the psychological and sociological aspects of group behavior; that is, an individual’s behavior reflects and/or reacts to the larger social structures. “The social identity

approach reinforces the idea that individuals' social cognitions are socially construed depending on their group or collective frames of reference" (Padilla & Perez 2003:43). Because the culture practices of the collective group can, and often does, influence the thoughts, emotions, and behaviors of the individual members, cultural competence is a large factor in social identity theory. The importance of cultural competence is suggested by Ethier and Deaux's (1994) results, that the predictors of a strong ethnic identity (a high cultural competence) include the language spoken in the home, the racial and ethnic composition of the community, and the amount of social interaction with members of the same ethnic group. Tajfel's social identity theory "incorporate[s] three main points: (a) people are motivated to maintain a positive self-concept, (b) the self-concept derives largely from group identification, and (c) people establish positive social identities by favorably comparing their in-group against an out-group" (Padilla & Perez, 2003: 43). Social psychologist Marilynn Brewer (1991) stresses the need to assimilate/"fit in" yet to also differentiate one self from others. Marilynn borrows Tajfel's concept of "motivation" and condenses it into two core motives: the need to be unique and the need to belong.

Social stigma

The process of "finding" a group within which one can belong and still maintain certain unique characteristics requires that one be aware of the cultural practices and beliefs of the group i.e. become culturally competent.⁶ This increase in awareness of one's group's cultural practices and beliefs may also bring awareness of others' judgments, prejudices, and dislikes towards our group. Social stigma "is a function of having an attribute that conveys a devalued social identity

⁶ I have placed the word *finding* within quotation marks because this assumes individuals can freely choose to be, or not to be, part of a group. Many would argue that, often, one is automatically a member of a group based on one's ascribed characteristics: race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation. In this case, *finding* would need to be replaced with *accepting*, or another one of its synonyms.

in a particular context. More specifically, possession of a particular attribute might lead individuals to be stigmatized in one context but not in another” (Padilla & Perez 2003:45). The age that this awareness is completely developed is still uncertain, but it is believed to be established by adolescence. Individuals undergoing social stigma often make the conscious decision to increase their identification with the stigmatized group they belong to. The young Puerto Rican American girls I interviewed are part of a group that experience social stigma and discrimination for a number of reasons, including their oppressive history, race/ethnicity, and their gender. The following sections explain these specific social problems in more detail.

Colonialism

“La Isla del Encanto” (the island of Enchantment) during the first two, three, and four decades of the twentieth century experienced an unexpected transformation that forcefully took a hold of its puertorriqueños. This transformation not only pulled them onto the dance floor with a sweet-sounding promise of a dance, to a Puerto Rican ballad, but it also left them in a state of frustration, after one too many turns. Prior to 1898, Puerto Rico’s economy was dominated by semi-feudal *haciendas*, or plantations, from which 32% of the cultivated land produced food crops. With the end of the Spanish-American War in 1898, Puerto Rico was a self-governing nation for only a matter of days, before it was officially transferred from the hands of the Spanish into those of the Americans. Reactions to this shift in leadership varied from country to country and person to person. Spanish engineer Julio Baviera’s response to the young *sanjuaneros* (supporters of Manuel Macias who became head of the Puerto Rican government under American control) was, “I have never seen such a servile, ungrateful country...In twenty-four hours, the people of Puerto Rico went from being fervently Spanish to enthusiastically American...They humiliated themselves, giving in to the invader as the slave bows to the

powerful lord” (Negrón-Muntaner 2004:11). Most islanders did not agree with Baviera’s outlook on the transition because:

Puerto Rico had been a neglected part of the Spanish colonial system. It had been [hoped that it would be] somewhat less neglected by the Americans, but here inconsistency in policies effectively prevented occasional *good* intentions from making their full impact felt [emphasis added]” (Glazer and Moynihan 1970:87).

The amendment of the “Organic Act of Puerto Rico” (Jones-Shafroth Act) in 1917 provided island-born Puerto Ricans with automatic U.S. citizenship, making them eligible for federal public assistance - public assistance that would soon become vital in their survival, as a people, a culture, and an island.⁷ Although Puerto Ricans were now officially U.S. citizens, they neither had the right to vote nor were they represented in Congress.

By the 1930’s, only 14% of the cultivated land produced food crops causing the island’s economy to depend on the export of fewer products. Rexford Tugwell, an American agricultural economist who contributed to Roosevelt’s New Deal and was appointed as governor of Puerto Rico in 1942, authored the book *The Stricken Land* where he describes the perpetuation of rural poverty years after the United States assumed responsibility of the land. With little industry, considering all of the food crops (i.e. tobacco and coffee) were replaced by the establishment of sugar as the main crop, workers were forced to spend over 90% of their earnings on the purchasing of food for their families, therefore prohibiting workers from spending on material goods that would produce better standards of living (Rogler and Cooney 1984). Owners of the plantations located in more mountainous areas were forced to move to flatter land; since mountains were not suitable for growing sugar. This ‘coerced abandonment’ led to the erosion of land that, at one point, was able to produce good crop.

⁷ In a 2006 community survey it was estimated that 45.4% of Puerto Rico’s population lived below the poverty level (U.S. Bureau of the Census). This number is over three times higher than the percentage of the mainland’s population living below the poverty level (13.3%).

Sanitary facilities were primitive; shoes were rarely worn in the country districts; the ground was infested with sewage and parasites and so, too, was the population. The details of the infant mortality rate, death rates from various causes, all showed the effects of a grinding poverty that is scarcely imaginable in contemporary industrial countries. Most of the population was unemployed and underemployed and suffered from hunger (Glazer and Moynihan 1970:87).

Stripped from personal control over its own economy increased puertorriqueños awareness of the island's complete dependency on the larger American economic system (Tugwell 1948:313).

They turned to their “motherland” for guidance, comfort and, most importantly, aid.

It was after World War II that the largest waves of migration to the United States began. The island's massive and sudden industrialization left many farmers unemployed. To alleviate this drastic rise in unemployment, the United States, under a plan created by the Industrial Development Company, began exporting laborers to the mainland and having them create contractual agreements with U.S. factory owners.⁸ Fathers, daughters, and wives were uprooted and separated from the lives that were so familiar to them, causing an overwhelming amount of emotional and psychological stress. Concerned that the exportation of their skilled persons would not only hurt the island's economy, but also causes Puerto Ricans to develop as dependent people, the United States proposed the project *Operation Bootstrap* in 1947. This plan provided Puerto Ricans the opportunity to help themselves.

Between 1940 and 1964, the GNP increased nearly ninefold and the manufacturing output went up eighteen times. Theoretically, this growth should have provided jobs and curbed emigration; however, just the opposite happened: rather than unemployment being reduced, it increased and instead of providing more local ownership of capital, it provided huge incentives for more US capital investment on the island (Baker 2002:40).

⁸ Citizenship had been granted to Puerto Rican's before the seasons of contractual agreements. Unlike others who were forced to leave the United States once their contracts were over, Puerto Ricans did not have to, and often did not return home with the ending of their contracts. Still, this universal citizenship has resulted in what many refer to as the “circular migration” between Puerto Rico and the United States. Thus, Puerto Ricans are particularly linked to their country of origin even though they may reside in the continental United States.

Therefore, the largest influx of people to the mainland occurred in the 1950's and early 1960's. Although Puerto Ricans migrated to Illinois, Massachusetts, and New Jersey, New York City continues to be the home to the largest Puerto Rican community- the location where most migrants moved in order to work in the textile and garment industries.

With the rough combination of having to live close to the city's textile factories, migrating with very little savings, if any, and having to financially support impoverished family members living in Puerto Rico, migrated puertorriqueños had no choice but to become residents of substandard neighborhoods. "A...misfortune [wa]s the housing situation, which consign[ed] those without energy to the frightful one-room furnished dwellings carved out of brownstones and apartment houses principally on the West Side of Manhattan" (Glazer & Moynihan 1970:121.) In 1960, the median household income for a Puerto Rican family living in New York was substantially lower than even the median household income for a *nonwhite* family: \$3,811 and \$4,437, respectively (Glazer & Moynihan, 1970). Because a large number of Puerto Ricans showed Indian and Black physical characteristics, "color was a problem for Puerto Ricans" interested in upward mobility (134).

There is strong tendency, especially in the 'advanced' countries, for observers and 'opinion-makers' of all sorts...to treat migrations, no matter what their scale, as isolated, random events, outside of the central thrust of social development. Moreover, we are encouraged to think of the migrants as deviants, as the cause of disruption (Benmayor & Skotnes 2005:6).

The reality is that Puerto Ricans living in the United States were, and still are secluded, discriminated against and, above all, purposefully overlooked. United States citizenship has brought Puerto Ricans nothing but conflict, tension, and struggle. Puerto Ricans are American citizens who "have traditionally been denied access to employment, training programs, adequate housing, proper health care, and quality education" (Baker 2002:45). Any analysis and

interpretation of a cultural practice requires the consideration of its historical political and economic realities. This impact of colonialism, suppression, exploitation, and racism have had an enormous impact on generations of Puerto Ricans, and the United States' dominate nature is largely responsible for the situation of puertorriqueños today.

According to many of the young women I interviewed, Americans are very privileged and are continuously benefiting from the endless number of opportunities open to them. Unfortunately the oppressive history of Puerto Ricans prevents them from reaping these same benefits. When asked about life for Americans living in the United States, *Carla* said, with a bit of resentment in her voice, "Some White people – the women are like housewives and they just stay at home in their little quiet peaceful neighborhoods and they are sitting there at home baking a pie.⁹ Have their nice houses and their maids doing stuff." There were numerous times when these young puertorriqueñas seemed to use the words "American" and "White" or "they" interchangeably, and so I began inquiring about this observation in hopes of better understanding why they rarely included themselves in the discussions on Americans. One of the first few times *Adriana* used the word "they" I asked her if she could specify to whom exactly she was referring. She answered "American people. Like Whites." Knowing that *Adriana* was born in Boston, Massachusetts, I asked her if she considered herself an American as well and her response was a single "yeah." In attempting to understand this complex issue, I raised the question with *Valerie*, asking her why she thought "American" is often equated with "White." She replied:

It just makes me feel like you know I'm American I say okay 'cause I was born here but I wouldn't say that I'm American American because I don't look like American I think. Because that's mostly what America is. That's the history of America – that it's white and European.

⁹ Actual names have been replaced with pseudonyms to protect the identities of these young women.

Unfortunately, these young ladies live in a society where the dominant group exemplifies *all* that they, and their families, do/are not (i.e. rich, educated, blonde hair and blue eyes.) For *Adriana* the American Dream is just something she “gets asked every single year” in school. It is not a concept that stems from the cultural values and practices of their ancestors. These young women recognize that they do not resemble those that make up the dominate group, and, therefore, feel that although they were born in the United States, they could never *just* be American. The lives they live along with many of their physical features automatically characterize them as foreigners in the United States.

Ethnic Identity Formation

Referred to by many researchers as the ethnic component of social identity, ethnic identity is considered an essential part of a person’s self-concept. The strength of an individual’s connection to an ethnic group and adoption of the attitudes and behaviors associated with that group has a direct effect on their cognition, emotions, and behavior. Similar to the stages in Marcia’s four ego identity statuses (1966), Jean Phinney (1989) created a three-staged model of ethnic identity development that describes the changes in a person’s attitudes towards their identified ethnicity, over time. The progression model includes the following phases: unexamined ethnic identity, ethnic identity search (or exploration) and achieved ethnic identity.

Successfully reaching “achieved identity” status requires that the individual view their ethnic group positively and is clear about the group’s meanings, characteristics, and value. The psychological construct of ethnic identity has been explained as consisting of the following six components: (1) Ethnicity and ethnic self-identification, (2) Sense of belonging, (3) Exploration, (4) Positive and negative attitudes towards one’s ethnic group, (5) Ethnic involvement/behavior, and (6) Values and beliefs.

Because of the many dimensions of this complex concept, reaching an achieved ethnic identity is not viewed as a necessarily linear process. A recent study by Rosenthal & Feldman (1991) on Chinese American immigrants found that although ethnic knowledge and involvement decreased with the second generation, very little change in the amount of value placed on the ethnicity was noted. Utilizing the six components mentioned above, three main frameworks are discussed in the literature studying ethnic identity.

Acculturation Theory deals with the internal changes a person experiences when in constant contact with two distinctive cultures. Under the bi-linear model (traditional/dominant), ethnic identity is determined based on the strengths of the individual's ties to both the host (mainland) culture and their ethnic culture. The four main psychological adjustment options available include: bicultural/acculturation, assimilation, separation/ethnically identified, and marginalization (Kroeber & Kluckhohn 1952).

Ethnic Identity Formation is founded upon Erik Erikson's theory of ego identity formation which details the importance of exploration and experimentation in attaining an achieved identity. It stresses the constant development and evolving nature of ethnic identity formation.

For visible minorities from disfavored groups, the qualitative experience of ethnicity has special implications for ethnic identity formation processes. The special environmental conditions that minority youth are forced to confront...has implications for the social experiences and treatment of ethnic minority youth and their responses to same, particularly during puberty when salient affective, cognitive, and physical developments are underway (Spencer et al. 1983:369).

The third and final framework often used to study ethnic identity is *Social Identity Theory*. This theory stresses the idea that a firm sense of group identification provides the individual with the necessary tools to maintain a self-concept. This is necessary because if their

respective ethnic group is not valued and highly esteemed by the dominant group in their society, the likelihood of developing a negative social identity increases drastically (Lewin 1948).

Problems are also seen to arise when an individual identifies with more than one ethnic group. Achieved bicultural ethnic identity is a complex process that entails integrating the values, attitudes, and traditions of two ethnicities that could be conflicting, at times (Utsey 2002). Coleman et al. (2001) suggest that individuals who have reach “achieved identity” learn to utilize a “behavioral episode schemata” for each social context encountered.

Racial Identity Formation

The national perception of race consists of four “distinct” categories: Asian, Black, White, and Native American. In the United States, race is a socially defined construct, based on physical traits, that is affected by contextual differences. Many researchers stress the importance of race, explaining how self-identifying using one’s ethnicity will no longer be necessary (similar to the way European immigrants were able to successfully assimilate). Because the differences in the phenotypical characteristics of some ethnic groups are stronger than others in America, this “option” of choosing to use a racial identifier is available for only some.

Historically speaking, the roots of the Puerto Rican people include Taino, African, and Spanish. Requiring that they choose White or Black as their race is like asking Puerto Ricans to privilege one heritage at the expense of the others. Therefore, many migrants from the island have chosen to use their national identity as their racial category – Puerto Rican. Living in the United States and experiencing constant interactions with people of other racial groups, second and third generation Latinos recognize that racial labels not only affect one’s self-identity but also influence the way they are perceived by others.

U.S. born offspring are less inclined to use the origin country as a frame of reference and more inclined to interact extensively with African-Americans and other minority groups. Thus, the U.S. born more often develop what has been called an 'adversarial stance' toward the dominant white society – this entails rejecting the black or white identity and adopting a panethnic identity or rejecting the notion of race (Zambrana 2002:35).

Understanding the repercussions of identifying as “Black” in a society that discriminates, devalues, and oppresses this specific race, Afro – Latinos are more inclined to reject the notion of race. Rejecting the “White” and “Black” American labels and, instead, accepting a national or ethnic identifier causes internal conflict. “...Even if Latinos/as born in the United States are not Americans, they are also not Mexicans or Cubans, since they are also viewed as foreigners in Mexico or Cuba” (Golash-Boza 2006:35). In order to create a solution to this conflict, racial labels such as *Latina American*, *Puerto Rican – American*, and *Cuban American* have been created – only to be referred to as “ethnic” labels by the America’s political community.

As mentioned above, realizing that they don’t share physical attributes with White Americans makes it harder for Puerto Ricans to incorporate themselves into the American mainstream (dominant) culture (Padilla 2003). At the beginning of every conversation, I asked each girl to describe their skin complexion in one or two words. Their choice of skin tone labels shows how they desire to decrease the level of social stigma they experience. This is illustrated in *Debora’s* comment on her skin color. She described her complexion as “...coffee. Well not coffee but kind of light brown.” In the Spanish culture coffee is often served with milk (café con leche). Realizing that, in the American culture, coffee signifies a “dark brown” color she quickly changes her description to “light brown.”

I also asked each girl to state their race and ethnicity. All of the young women identified “Puerto Rican” as their race. The responses I received for ethnicity included: "Ethnicity? Well...I can't say. Ethnicity like... (long pause)", “What do you mean?”, and “I don’t know

what ethnicity is.” The concept of an *ethnicity* was foreign to these young women.

Understanding race as a national indicator, these women recognized that their origins differed from the origins of Blacks and Whites. Therefore, they did not see any reason to identify as a Black or White American. When told the “race” options available to Latinos living in the United States, *Valerie* hesitated and then responded, “I would pick other ‘cause I’m not Black and I’m not that White so I’m like in the middle so I would pick other. Well it doesn’t sound like a real race but...” Latinos that chose “other” as their race in the 2000 U.S. census did so because “they understood their race as some combination of nationality, culture, familial socialization, birthplace, skin color, ethnicity, or a combination of these. For many Latinos race is primarily cultural” (Vaquero et al. 2006:380). Therefore, these young women were not able to answer the questions on ethnicity because this American-based division between race and ethnicity does not properly represent their understanding of the concept(s).

Gender Expectations

In an article published in 1999, psychologist Norma Cofresi notes that “Puerto Rican women on the mainland have increased their average education levels, have been able to switch from operative jobs to white-collar roles, and have a higher rate of employment in professional and technical jobs than other Hispanic groups in the United States” (1999:161). Two years later, psychologists Zambrana & Zoppi (2002) comment on how the “gender roles and stereotypes of Latinas as submissive, underachievers, and caretakers of elder/family members are often reinforced by family, school personnel, and media” (42). Many would be perplexed by what seemed to be either a contradiction in the research findings or an unfortunate setback. This paradox is summed up by Elizabeth Crespo in “Puerto Rican Women: Migration and Changes in

Gender Roles” in one sentence – “*Estudia por si tu marido te sale un sinvergüenza* (Study in case your husband turns out to be no good)” (Benmayor & Skotnes 2005:137).

This advice, often given to daughters by Puerto Rican working-class mothers living in the United States, contains both traditional and non-traditional ideologies about what *they* (mothers) believe to be the expectations of women’s in society. This common expression indicates the need for both personal and financial independence (non-traditional idea) and the need to fulfill one’s nurturing role as mother and caretaker (traditional idea). The mothers of my interviewees, who either migrated from Puerto Rico at a young age (first generation) or were born in the United States (second generation), are in a situation where they find it is necessary to make some adjustments to the extremely familiar traditional gender expectations.

To help explain this seemingly paradoxical position, Baker (2004) stresses the distinction between *traditional gender ideology* and *traditional gender behavior*. According to Baker “it is not that the paradoxical relationship between behavior and ideology simply co-occurs; rather, transgressing traditional gender behavior helps to protect the traditional gender ideology that is dear and fundamental to them” (2004:405-6). The guidance a Puerto Rican mother offers her daughter is grounded in “the basic conditions of survival.” Working-class Puerto Rican women living in the United States were perceived by many Americans as uneducated and uncultured welfare recipients who birthed more children than they could support. These perceptions of Puerto Rican women were deceptive in nature because they were not based on any true understanding of the Latino culture and family values, making life more challenging for Puerto Rican women living in America. The findings suggest, though, that Puerto Rican women vary in their attachment to traditional gender expectations (Confresí 1999). By telling their daughters “*Estudia por si tu marido te sale un sinvergüenza*” Puerto Rican mothers are able to challenge

these existing structures of race, class, and patriarchy without completely disregarding the cultural values they hold so close to their hearts. In doing so, the actions of these Puerto Rican mothers and their daughters “exemplify the connections between experiencing oppression, developing a self-defined standpoint on that experience, and resistance” (Collins 1989:749).

What researchers have noticed is that “inherent to the continued development of resiliency, the environment in which a Latina functions must value the cultural assets and strength she brings as social capital. Yet Latinas become consumers of the host culture in their efforts to survive” (Ramirez 1976; Munoz-Vasquez 1979; Rodriguez 1999; Zambrana & Zoppi 2002). The cultural values and resources of Puerto Rican families include an emphasis on collective orientation and responsibility, respecting elders and siblings, and having religious faith. Puerto Rican families have a deep sense of family obligation and often times “familism is sustained largely through the ideology of ‘sacrifice,’ in which a ‘good woman’ is defined by her self abnegation and by placing family and community needs before her own. Thus, a ‘good woman’ is one who is selfless and willing to ‘sacrifice’ in order to insure the well-being of her family, including the well-being of her parents as they age” (Confresi 1999:162). The cultural values being instilled in these young Latinas often conflict with the American principles of independence, assertiveness, and competitiveness (Zambrana & Zoppi 2002). As native born Americans, these young Puerto Rican girls are exposed to the American lifestyle but feel a certain degree of responsibility to the customs and beliefs of their parents. Findings show that this attempt to conform to two distinct cultures can often cause feelings of frustration and anxiety (Padilla 2003). Gloria Anzaldua expresses this as something she continues to deal with, during an interview with Ann E. Reuman.

It’s hard; it’s like a tight-rope that if I allow the Eurocentric part of me too much space it means that I have turned my back on my race, the Chicanos and

Mexicanos. If I stick too much to this nationalism, then it means I'm not realistic, I'm not being in the late twentieth century, living with these realities...And yes, in negotiating the two different nationalities I've come up with this thing that I call the new tribalism. I am attempting to not react to either one of these sides, but to act, to be proactive rather than reactive, and that's really hard to do, 'cause there are no maps (Anzaldua & Reuman 2000:13).

These feelings of frustration and anxiety were expressed in many of the conversations I held with these young ladies. The main cause of frustration, for these girls, dealt with the issue of the division of labor in and outside the home. As *Felicita* expressed:

Around my house, or in Spanish families, they say the man is the one who controls the whole family so they expect us to clean the house and clothes and wash the dishes, cook dinner. I think it's unfair 'cause a man and a woman should share equal parts. It's both their house and they shouldn't leave the responsibility to just one person.

In traditional Latino households, the females are often expected to maintain their family's virtues, values, and ways of living. Male dominance is particularly present in Hispanic/Latino families (Strong et al. 1994). These young women are well aware of the opportunities open to females in the United States and are choosing to challenge the traditional "way-of-thinking" that is the foundation on which their families stand firm.

METHOD

Making Personal Contacts

This research project has forced me to conjure up memories of my experiences with Boston's Latino community. I can vividly remember the problems I faced when attempting to recruit young, Puerto Rican American girls. Not being familiar with the Boston area, I spent many hours sitting at local coffee shops typing into the computer's search bar every possible variation of "Boston organizations for Puerto Rican youth." After jotting down the names and contact information for a number of *promising* places, I found myself in endless cycles of

“phone/email tag.” The question that always seemed to put our game of tag to an abrupt end was: “Will you be providing these young girls with any compensation for their participation? You do realize that many of our youth come from low-income households.” My replies assured the Program Directors that if I were receiving research funding I would have definitely offered monetary compensation. My, “No,” as an answer to their rightfully asked question was always met with ignored emails and phone messages.

As the Graduate Assistant for MIT’s Latino Cultural Center (LCC), I often receive emails from social organizations and community leaders who are interested in co-sponsoring community events with the Latino students of MIT. Normally, I scan these emails and forward them to LCC’s student executive board. One email stood out from the rest, though. Luis was the president of a bilingual multimedia production based in New York. This production company works on projects that deal with issues identity conflict, struggles, and experiences. Luis was offering to be our keynote speaker at our upcoming multicultural conference. Quickly, I replied to his email with a description of my research interests and with questions pertaining to the recruitment process. His next email included his personal phone number.

Although he was located in New York City, Luis informed me about a close Puerto Rican friend of his who lived in the greater Boston area and managed an advertising agency whose clients were mostly Latino businesses and organizations. I received an email from his friend, Fernando, the following day praising me for my research and informing me that he had sent mass email to all his Latino friends and associates, explaining my research project and asking for any helpful contact information. Although a few people graciously responded with some content that could possibly be included in the theoretical section of my paper, I was still left with a research idea that was popular among the Latino community and no participants. What first appeared to

be just an avenue leading me to a “dead end” road soon turned into one of my most enlightening moments.

In “Hispanic Nation: Culture, Politics, and the Construction of Identity,” Geoffrey Fox explains how “an ethnocultural community intrinsically implies a link of blood and is fundamentally an extended family” (238). Frustrated that my efforts to recruit young Puerto Rican girls appeared to be in vain, I began wondering why the Program Directors of the organizations I initially contacted weren’t as eager as Fernando; someone who knew nothing about me except my research interest. Yet, he had jumped at the opportunity of assisting me in completing my work. I finally realized that the difference in the two cases was the interpersonal “distance” between me as researcher and them as community members. I needed to secure the trust and support of the people in Boston’s Latino community. Because I “knew” one of his friend’s, Fernando considered me a friend through association and therefore assumed that my intentions were nothing but good. The Program Directors were contacts, but Fernando was a *personal contact*.

Feeling as if I had “luckily” stumbled onto the key that would unlock the door where all of my future participants were gathered behind, I realized I needed to begin discussing my research ideas with whom I had already built trusting relationships – my students at MIT. During one of our biweekly meetings, I began expressing my research frustrations to the student president of the Latino Cultural Center. In the middle of a sentence I was interrupted by his question as to whether or not I knew Rosie – a woman who was the Director of a youth organization in Jamaica Plain and the Performing Arts teacher at the Hernandez School. On numerous occasions, many of the Latino students at MIT have helped Rosalba and her students organize events where folkloric dances are performed for the local community; a community

whose residents are predominating Puerto Rican and Dominican. Realizing this could possibly be my ticket into Boston's Latino community, I copied Rosie's number from his phone's contact list.

A meeting for me to meet with the principal of the Hernandez School was arranged by Rosie and all that was asked of me was to bring to the appointment any documents that would be relevant to the conversation and could be presented to legitimize my research project (such as a written research proposal, copy of the consent form(s), and/or interview guide). After a lengthy discussion on the necessity of forcing such subject matter in the forefront of today's academia, whether it's in the classroom, at a conference, or in a leading journal, I was given more than the principal's consent – it was almost as if I received something resembling more like a (her) benediction (blessing). That same afternoon I was given a tour of the school, introduced to a number of teachers whose classes would provide my participants. An interview schedule was created for the following week. As school was letting out for the day and I was gathering my belongings, Rosie mentioned how it might be beneficial for me to visit her organization on Saturday morning, during which I could familiarize myself with the young women on a more personal level. Unaware of the enormous amount of time I was about to commit, I agreed.

I was to get off at the same train stop I used to visit the school – the only difference was in the direction I was to walk. While standing at the light nearest to the train station, waiting for the white man to signal when I was allowed to cross the two-way street, I look to my right as a silver Honda Civic is quickly approaching my traffic light with a faded blue and red flag hanging from his rearview mirror and a sticker on the bottom right hand corner of the windshield of a lighthouse with writing below it that cries out “*Puerto Rico lo hace major*” (Puerto Rico does it better). Realizing that my fixation with his “fading” flag and “bold” sticker had prevented me

from noticing that the white man had stopped the civic and was allowing me to go for only another eighteen seconds; I quickly cross the two-way street. Halfway up the hill, I stop in my tracks knowing that I had reached my destination. Before me was a two-story house painted orange, yellow, red, green, and blue. After the first day of introductions, the colors recognized and welcomed me as the art teacher every Saturday for the rest of the school year.

The research and writing processes have been extensive yet short-lived, wearisome yet fundamental, challenging yet effortless ones for me as sociologist, researcher, listener, art teacher, and puertorriqueña. I have allowed myself to grow with each interview, conversation, and art class, and the one thing I have learned is that in order to be successful you have to live the life of both a “Giver” and a “Receiver”. Choosing one over the other signifies that you are either an incompetent and pathetic being who has nothing to offer (constant receiver) or a body who has failed to connect with his/her inner being and has yet to recognize his/her needs (constant giver). As rational and perceptive beings we should all become more conscious of our individual strengths and weaknesses. When two or more individuals, groups, or communities, whose attitudes run parallel, are able to unite, the possibilities are endless. I *needed* Puerto Rican girls to interview and Rosie *needed* someone to teach her girls; someone who she sensed would successfully identify with them on multiple levels.

Jamaica Plain

Jamaica Plain (*JP*) is considered to be a very diverse area, in many respects. Although originally the home to mainly German and Irish immigrants, most who were involved in the brewery business, initial progressions made towards urban renewal (early 1980's) attracted a large number of students, artists, young professionals, gays and lesbians to the neighborhood. Attempts at revitalizing *JP* continued into the 1990's with the increase in the number of low-

income rental units and the redevelopment of some of the smaller, local businesses. Often difficult to define geographically because of its lack of distinctly defined boundaries (with some exceptions such as the Arnold Arboretum), *JP* consists of roughly eleven subdistricts. The main streets that run through most of the localities include Centre Street, Washington Street, and South Street. The types of businesses located off of these main streets include, but are not limited to, hair salons and beauty shops, food markets (many of which sell Latino ingredients and are often referred to as *bodegas*), and restaurants known for their Caribbean menus. The existence of these more “ethnic” businesses is mainly due to the large percentage of Latinos residing in Jamaica Plain. In 1980, prior to the onset of urban renewal, the percentages of residents who were labeled as Non-Hispanic Whites and Latinos were 59% and 20%, respectively. During the redevelopment of *JP*, its Hispanic/Latino population increased by 30%. Although the percentage of Hispanics/Latinos living in Jamaica Plain had dropped from 26% to 23% by 2000, it was still considered the neighborhood with the largest Latino community in Boston.

Puertorriqueña Americanas

The young women I interviewed are second and third generation Puerto Rican Americans; meaning that either their parents or grandparents migrated to the mainland from Puerto Rico.¹⁰ The sample consisted of 18 young ladies between the ages of 11-15 ($M = 12.2$ yrs). Each girl was asked to complete a research packet, which included a parental consent form, a child assent form, and a copy of the Bicultural Involvement Questionnaire, before beginning the interview process.

¹⁰ Throughout this thesis I use the term “Puerto Rican American” for the single purpose of keeping things simple when referring to the young women. The grandparents and/or parents of these young ladies are from the Puerto Rican island and all 18 of them were born in Boston, MA. For this reason I have chosen to use the label “Puerto Rican American.” One point worthy of mentioning is that a few of the ladies did not use the word “American” to define themselves during our conversation(s). All of the 18 young women *did* use the term “Puerto Rican,” in some way or another.

Data Collection

The data for this research project were collected through two main methods – Bicultural Involvement Questionnaire (BIQ) and semi-structured interviews. The original 33-item Bicultural Involvement Questionnaire and corresponding scale, created by Dr. Jose Szapocznik (1980), was utilized as the preliminary measure for this research project. The BIQ was used to assess the involvement of each participant in each of the two cultures, independently. This questionnaire allowed me to more easily gain a better understanding of their involvement with mainstream American culture and involvement the Puerto Rican culture. According to the results collected from the questionnaire all 18 girls are "bicultural." At the bottom of the questionnaire, I included twelve cultural/racial/ethnic labels and asked each of the young ladies to rank them from the label she most likes to be called (1) to the label she least likes to be called (12). Each of the 18 adolescents was independently interviewed. One month after the first interview, 9 of the 18 young women were interviewed a second time. The interviews all began with general, broad questions but certainly allowed the interviewees to be as in-depth and personal as they saw fit.

Mi Testimonio (My Testament)

I have yet to visit the island but have still witnessed the beaches where the waters and the sky are one body; where women parade around *La Plaza de las Américas* in their white espadrilles and salmon-colored dresses, and where fathers, uncles and cousins all bring wooden dining room chairs with their *cervezas* out to the front porch for a night of aggressive, yet good-natured rounds of dominos. All of this is familiar to me because my grandmother's porch was located in the back of the house where the sunshine promised by the state's nickname was always shining like a bright spotlight through the screens of the porch. I remember a second cousin visiting my grandmother from Puerto Rico and me standing outside my abuela's one-story home waving as my parents pulled out of her driveway and slowly drove to the end of the street where their car made a right turn and prepared itself for the two minute drive to my one-story home. Upon opening her

linen closet I was hit with floral patterns and colors who seemed to shared with me that they had seen many years of clothes pinning. Assuming there was a reason I had been standing in front of the noisy linen closet for minutes more than I should have, she reached past my shoulder, pulled out and began unfolding something. It was an orange and brown bed sheet and pillowcase. Remembering that my sleeping over was not preplanned, it was evident that I had not brought my pillow. Abuela returned to the noisy linen closet, pulled two more bed sheets and stuffed the orange and brown pillowcase creating an extremely downy pillow for me in seconds. I quickly fell asleep that night as if it were Christmas Eve – in hopes of rushing the moon and star's time in the sky. I awoke to the sound of tazas of café hitting against each other as they were carelessly carried from the kitchen cabinet to the coffee table in the back porch. Thrilled at how quick morning had arrived, I sloppily folded my sheets, placed them on the foot of my grandmother's twin-side bed and walked through the living room. Passing the golden spray-painted mirror hanging on one of the fading yellow walls of the living room, I took notice of my profile realizing that I hadn't combed my unruly curly hair. I would have liked to revisit the bathroom and run some cold water through my hair but, unfortunately, time did not permit. As I walked through the living room and passed the entrance to the kitchen it was as if I was watching a muted scene from una novela. As I began pushing the sliding door open my ears were welcomed by the pleasant sounds of birds chirping in nearby pine trees, coffee cups hitting their corresponding saucers and, most important of all, the laughter of full-spirited women. Silently, I pulled a chair up to the circle of women. It seemed my joining had gone unnoticed, except for my aunt shifting her chair over to the left in order to make room for mine and my grandmother passing me the plate of crackers and cheddar cheese. No one directly acknowledged me for fear of missing an important detail from my cousin's story—who was complaining, in the most animated nature, about the negative changes she's noticed in her husband's motivation to work over the years. I didn't mind not being received with a 'buenos días' for I was about to gain some insight into the lives of my grandmother, aunt, and cousin and, in effect, into my own personal life.

According to feminist theorist, Trinh Minh-ha, "Storytelling, the oldest form of building historical consciousness in community, constitutes a rich oral legacy, whose values have regained all importance recently, especially in the context of writings by women of color" (1989:148). In preparing myself for writing this section of my paper, I read and, sometimes reread, psychological, sociological and anthropological texts that attempted to define and outline the various ways of approaching narrative inquiry. I understood that I was to treat each girl as an

individual narrator; a voice linked to a personal story of struggle and survival that wants and desires to be told.

In order to “properly” represent these admirable, yet often silenced voices, I soon realized that I could not *act* as neither a researcher whose primary responsibility was to gather useful information from the personal narratives nor a fellow puertorriqueña sharing her moments of pain and moments of delight. I was to *act* as listener to each narrator; always receptive to the emotions, thoughts, and interpretations highlighted by each social actor’s own lived reality.

A *testimonio* is a novel or novella-length narrative, produced in the form of a printed text, told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events she or he accounts. The predominant formal aspect of the *testimonio* is the voice that speaks to the reader through the text in the form of an “I” that demands to be recognized, that wants or needs to stake a claim on our attention (Beverley 2005:548).

Narration in *testimonio* is often referred to as a *narracion de urgencia* (an emergency narrative) for it includes as underlying urgency, on the narrator’s part, to communicate his/her struggle for survival. “Memory itself is a political event. Social structures are often so powerful that they actually format memory into accepted boundaries, denying the validity of experiences outside the parameters of accepted social interpretations and distorting and fragmenting experience” (Elenes 2000:109). Therefore, this type of oral history requires its listeners and/or readers to relate their own identities and values with those of another (the narrator). “Unlearning privilege means recognizing that it is not the intention of subaltern cultural practice simply to signify its subalternity to us” (Beverley 2005:548). For that reason, narration in *testimonio* not only provides the space for re-memory and (un)silencing voices, which may act as an extremely liberating and restorative experience, but, moreover, allows narrators to challenge what intellectuals and others accept as history, culture, and, most importantly, truth.

Self-Reflexivity

It took less than ten minutes into my first interview for me to become aware of certain problems that could easily arise because of how I have voluntarily, and sometimes involuntarily, chosen to identify myself as a *puertorriquena americana*. While speaking with the first girl about the relationship she shares with her mother, she finds herself not able to think of the words – the English words, that is. “My mother is always there for...how do you say it? You know, *para darme consejo*.” By beginning the interview with a brief description of my personal background, including details about my family’s Puerto Rican roots, I failed to predict the assumptions that would be made by these girls about my beliefs, perspectives, experiences, and skills – including my ability to speak and understand the Spanish language. Fortunately, I do speak Spanish and therefore, understood that she meant her mother gives her advice, and was able to offer a simple nod. By focusing on clarifying assumptions and generalizations made about Latinas, specifically puertorriqueñas, living in the United States and better understanding the lived experiences of these young girls, I failed to pay any attention to how identifying as a *puertorriquena americana* myself could possibly affect the ways in which I am viewed by them. Anthropologist Rosalie Wax (1979) concluded, during an investigation on American Indian education, that one’s “gender, age, prestige, expertise, or ethnic identity may limit or determine what he or she can accomplish. Or to put it more positively...each gender and each age level has its own particular and peculiar advantages” (513-514). Realizing that I was what Patricia Collins refers to as an “outsider within,” my main goal became to work closely with these young Puerto Rican American girls to produce a collective narrative. I was not to take on the responsibility of *voicing* their stories, but to assist in creating the space needed for their voices to be heard. Self-

reflexive analysis was a constant process that allowed me to keep my story decentered and receptive to each of the girls' personal narrations (Zavella 1993).

Method of Analysis

The scores from the Bicultural Involvement Questionnaire were calculated using two separate subscales that measure Americanism and Hispanicism. Each interview was transcribed without the use of a transcription program. After the transcriptions were completed, portions of each interview were collected in a separate word document and assigned a number, according to each excerpts' theme/idea. After the coding process was finished, the selections were grouped according to the coping strategies mentioned. The four strategies that most young women identified with were then chosen for more extensive analysis. The four coping strategies include: making use of their social capital, distinguishing themselves from others, promoting and preserving cultural pride, and understanding the differences in various social contexts.

RESULTS

What is the future of the Puerto Rican *businessman*? There is no question that his path is not easy. There is the competition of the chain stores, more effective tastes change as English becomes more common. And there is, helping the chain stores, as if they needed it, the public policy of wiping out large numbers of small businessmen in the areas of older housing. But entrepreneurial *drive* is one of those aspects of human potentiality that is not easily destroyed, and a businessman will be able to do business under even the most adverse circumstances. One already sees such adaptations as the sprouting of Puerto Rican owned "superettes" on the West Side...[emphasis added] (Glazer & Moynihan 1970:113).

Although Glazer and Moynihan are describing the changes taking place in New York during the late 60's, this idea of possessing unstoppable "drive" can easily be applied to the lives of these young women. Thus far, I have detailed a few of the problems these ladies are confronted with on a daily basis, and not only were my claims supported by those who have

written on these same issues but also by the actual words of these young women. These problems are very real and add unnecessary stress to their lives. I decided to include sections in my paper that described these challenges because I strongly believe that they need to be brought to the forefront of our discussion, and in my opinion have yet to be properly addressed.

Referring to these ladies as *victims* of social inequality produces two undesirable effects: (a) they are perceived as helpless and weak and, in effect, (b) sympathized by many. These young women do not need sympathy or pity but, on the contrary, actively seek support, encouragement, and cooperation. Because these young women, in my opinion, have received minimal motivation and reassurance from the larger American public they have had to work that much harder to survive. In the midst of problems, these women are determined to persevere and, to in order to do so, have developed various coping strategies.¹¹ My conversations suggest that these young women are not empty vessels waiting to be defined by others in order to gain a sense of “self”; they actively generate and construct their own identities, and we need to acknowledge their work. Although these girls express many ways of dealing with difficult situations, I have decided to write on four of the main strategies utilized by these young women. As mentioned above, the strategies discussed below were determined from the coding and analysis processes. Reoccurring themes were further analyzed and grouped into four larger coping strategies. The coping strategies include, but are not limited to: making use of their social capital, distinguishing themselves from others, promoting and preserving cultural pride, and understanding the differences in various social contexts.

¹¹ The four strategies I detail in this thesis are strategies that the young women use to cope with problems. They find them to be beneficial and, therefore, continue to utilize them. By writing about these approaches I am in no way advocating or declaring that these are the *best* ways of handling their circumstances.

Strategy 1: “*In Others We Trust*: The Value Placed on Social Capital”

When you have a question and are in search of an answer or have a personal problem and are in search of personal advice, where and to whom do you turn? Many people’s responses include some mention of a neighbor, family member, friend, co-worker, or partner. There is something about interacting with others who are “dedicated to one’s well-being” that many of us find quite valuable. As social beings, our needs are fulfilled by the fellowship, sympathy, affection, and generosity we gain from the connections we maintain with others. Thus far, I have spoken of social capital only as a person-person interaction. According to Martti Siisianinen (2000), though, Bourdieu’s definition of *social capital* has two main components:

It is, first a resource that is connected with group membership and social networks. Membership in groups, and involvement in the social networks developing within these and in the social relations arising from membership can be utilized in efforts to improve the social position of the actors in a variety of different fields (11-12).

During the time I spent with the young ladies, there were five main social networks from which they received the most encouragement, loyalty, and moral support. These girls rely on their *family, peers, school, community, and contact with the island of Puerto Rico* for the encouragement to continue advancing forth.

Family

The importance of the family system, and the role it plays in the behavioral and psychological development of a child is an issue that has been analyzed repeatedly by social scientists. Growing up among parents, grandparents, uncles, cousins, and siblings, these young women truly experienced and recognized the benefits of strong familial relationships. Having been challenged by discrimination, oppression, and isolation, older generations recognize the

necessity of family loyalty and support. This outlook is incorporated into the rearing practices used by parents and grandparents – influencing the perspectives of these young Puerto Rican women. Although many researchers don't accept Putnam's (1993) conclusion on America's loss of social capital, including myself, I find his opinion on the significance of history very sensible. He writes approvingly of the saying "Where you get to depends on where you're coming from" because individuals respond to the social contexts presented to them by history and this may re-enforce the historical inheritance as well as remove it" (Kolankiewicz 1996:427). These girls have encountered problems in their daily lives and have chosen to adopt their family's effective method of handling the difficult situations.

When asked about her mother's response to her school performance, 14 year old *Alicia* smiles and answers:

I can see it in her face and expressions and so that just tells me keep on doing it. She's always been there for me. She's always saying your beautiful in every way, they're [other students] just jealous. They are just trying to take advantage of you and you are letting them do it. That's how she tries to motivate me – keep strong and be strong and try to succeed.

Alicia is well aware of her mother's expectations and utilizes the approval she receives from her mother as an inspiration to continue working hard. The praise shown on her mother's face is pleasing to *Alicia* and, in a similar manner, she expresses this pleasure in a smile. In talking about how regularly she receives advice, 12 years old *Carla* also speaks kindly of her mother. "My mom talks to me a lot about boys and problems with people at school and how to deal with them. She teaches me basically the general facts of life." *Carla* is aware of her mother's life experiences, sees her as a qualified authority figure, and, therefore, values her instructions and coaching.

Mothers aren't the only family member esteemed and admired by these young women. The respect and adoration these adolescents possess for their grandmothers is undeniable. In response to one of my questions during our second interview together, *Esperalda*, a 13 year old in seventh grader, begins by proposing the differences she feels exists between the mind-sets of Latinos and Whites. Body image was the main distinction mentioned.

They [white people] think that just because they are skinny they are more healthy. It really doesn't matter if you are fat or you are skinny. There are ways you can make fat people look very pretty. When I eat a lot she [grandmother] says '¡Te estas poniendo gorda! (You're getting fat!)' She says that to bother me but and then she says 'I'm just playing with you. You're okay. Stay like that.' I'm not skinny and I'm not fat. Sometimes I can be dramatic about it but [laughs] I have my ways of looking nice.

For many of the respondents, body image is real challenge that requires coping skills. When asked to explain the one thing she likes least about herself, 13 year old *Felicita* offers a brief yet honest reply. "My body. I'm trying to lose weight. I don't like – I'm fat." Sixth grader *Debora* shares *Felicita's* concern about appearance expectations placed on Latinas, by others.

"Sometimes I think they [white people] think only of a nice body. Well most of the time they always look for the booty and the body and not really how they [Latinas] feel or how they [Latinas] act, so that's not cool." It should, therefore, come as no surprise that *Esmeralda* chooses to speak on the problems of weight and body image for young girls today. After explaining her grandmother's supportive thoughts on her physical appearance *Esmeralda* follows with a personal comment on how nice she can look. The words of her grandmother have influenced her own view, and have reassured her that who she *is* is acceptable.

A few of the young women, when talking about their grandmothers, link them to stories of the past. When explaining to me how her grandparents live in the apartment above her parents', *Carla* pauses for a second and then continues by saying:

[I'm] very close to them. I'm really attached to them [grandparents]. My grandmother sits there – she used to sit there with me and my cousin and when we were younger she used to sit there with us and tell us her stories about when she was little. She was raised in Puerto Rico in the 1940's so she had a big family. She had thirteen sisters and brothers all together...my grandmother was the one who mostly paid attention to me and my cousin all the time.

Carla enjoys and cherishes the time she spends with her grandmother and has grown to value the stories of 'life in Puerto Rico' years ago. She attributes her grandmother's compassion and concern, for her and her cousin, to her grandmother's big family while growing up. *Carla* utilizes her grandmother's stories to not only better understand where she has "come from" but to also comprehend her present circumstances. Similarly, *Ines*, who is 11 years old and currently in the sixth grade, talks about how much her grandmother talks about growing up on the island.

Sometimes she tells me that I walk like her and talk like her sometimes like when she was little. She was like 'Oh you remind me of when I was little in Puerto Rico. I used to go to the beach a lot and I used to be in the water a lot.' We are really close and sometimes I feel like I'll be her one day [smiles]. I will do what she does.

The admiration behind *Ines* voice is indisputable. Through these spoken stories, she has become fascinated by the life her grandmother has led, both in Puerto Rico and on the mainland. The attachment she has grown to her grandmother has caused *Ines* to aspire to be more like her.

Friends

Social scientists agree that adolescents are not only influenced by their parents/family members but are also greatly affected by their friends. Research shows that the quality of the social bond shared with one's family members manifests itself in the relationships one forms with non-family members. Evidently, these young ladies are not only more inclined to interact and build friendships with those whose identities parallel theirs, but who can also provide them with support and optimism similar to that offered by their family members. Generally speaking,

individuals choose their friends based on the expectation that the friendships will be (a) useful, (b) pleasurable, and (c) bring them respect and admiration (Aristotle 2003). During our conversations together, these young women express the benefits of having friendships with people who are able to share their pleasurable, as well as painful, experiences.

When I ask about her time spent in Puerto Rico over the summer, *Marcela* explains in detail her and her cousins many exciting adventures. After mentioning the considerable amount of time she spent with her cousins while in Puerto Rico, I decide to ask her who she spends the most time with *here* (e.g. home, school, and/or neighborhood). *Marcela*, a 13 year old sixth grader, answers:

I hang out with a lot of Dominicans and Puerto Ricans and sometimes I hang out with American girls in my class. With the Puerto Ricans and Dominicans we talk a lot about clothes and music and stuff. But with my other [American] friend she just likes drawing and stuff.

She reveals to me her preference for socializing with Dominicans and Puerto Ricans.¹² *Marcela* realizes how much she favors interactions with others who share and promote her culture (music, style, etc.). This value that *Marcela* places on “commonality” is also communicated by her classmate, *Josephina* (12 years old). *Josephina* opens up about an incident when her and her mother were discriminated against. In the process, she attempts to understand why exactly White people refer to Puerto Ricans as “racist” because Puerto Ricans tend to spend a lot of time together. With frustration in her voice, *Josephina* does not deny the accusation but, instead, expresses how, for her, it is essential to feel comfortable around those who share her language, beliefs, and cultural practices.

¹² Soon after this comment *Marcela* states “Americans have blonde hair and they don’t color it or anything.” This leads me to believe that she equates American with being European white. Therefore, in the comment above, *Marcela* is claiming that she spends more time with Latinos than Whites because there exists more commonalities between her and Dominicans and Puerto Ricans.

I think they [white people] say that we [Puerto Ricans] are racist; which I don't really get...and that we're rude. That we don't belong here and we are way different from them. That we *like* our people and *not* white people and that we don't like being or doing things with them. Its more comfortable – well for me it's more comfortable to hang out with my people – even though some of them are cool and all, but I just like being more comfortable with the Puerto Rican people. I don't feel comfortable being around people who are not from where I am.

Surrounding herself with people who understand who she is as a young Puerto Rican woman and what she has had to undergo because of her identity provides her this sense of security. Those who share *Josephina's* culture appreciate “where she comes from” and, therefore, refrain from casting judgment and/or misperceiving her behaviors. Interacting with those who are “not from where she is from” would require her to pass through the walls of her comfort zone and increase the probability of receiving responses, from others that are negative, and possibly, detrimental. Opposition may arouse emotions of anxiety and doubt, causing her, or any of the other young ladies, to internalize the negativity and question her/their beliefs, behaviors, and practices. For fear of personal attack or destruction of their self-images, these young women choose to take control of the situation and stay in an environment that reduces “cognitive dissonance.”

Through personal experiences these young ladies have learned that remaining in an environment where they are constantly surrounded by people closely resembling them, provides a *sense of belonging*. Friendships are avenues from which advice, support, knowledge, and understanding can be exchanged. Many times, friendship is nothing more than a break from the vulnerability felt when coming in contact with strangers/others. Friends are expected to be trustworthy and not bring them harm. *Adriana* is a 15 year old who is in tenth grade and whose mother works as a secretary at the school where I conducted most of my interviews. At one point during our conversation, she struggles to explain to me how she prefers to get advice from her friends. She finds speaking about this difficult because she has just finished explaining to me

how supportive her family is, and did not want to portray her parents and older siblings in a negative light.

Finally she just exclaims:

I trust them [friends] more not to judge me. I live with my parents and whatever and they don't understand – my friends understand me more than family. My family, you know, want the best for you but they judge you every single day. And my friends are more like – not very judgmental, they're not going to say anything they're just there to help me.¹³

One thing I'd like to bring attention to is *Adriana's* use of the word "you." Although she is speaking about *her* parents, she decides to utilize the word "you" rather than "me." She realizes that she is saying something that could possibly be misinterpreted as negative affect towards her family, and this seems to make her a bit uneasy. She chooses to distance herself from the statement by saying "you", and then when referring to her friends she returns to first-person. When feeling neglected and misunderstood by others, these young women have learned the importance and necessity of creating loyal friendships. Attachment to their friendship circle provides these girls sense of purpose and direction.

School, Community, and Contact with the Island

In the lives of these girls, there exist other central networks of influence and support, outside of their family relationships and friendships. Their bilingual school, participation in community organizations, and connections with Puerto Rico are all social relations that promote ethnic awareness and understanding that help to activate cultural capital. These social networks

¹³ In the excerpt above, Adriana mentions "her friends" but a description of her friends is not provided. Later in the conversation she quickly describes how her friends are "mostly Hispanics." I have copied this part of the interview here. **Me:** Okay, so in your school what kinds of cliques are there? **Adriana:** Well, there's like White people in the corner [of the lunchroom], the Asians in the middle, the 9th graders in this table right here, the Blacks, and then the Hispanics and one White person right here where I am. **Me:** So you mainly hang out with the...? **Adriana:** Mostly Hispanics, yeah."

allow for positive experience and a sense of purpose, enabling these brave and uncompromising women to succeed in all avenues of their lives.

The theory of social, or cultural, reproduction has often linked with the unequal social structure of education.

Within the social reproduction model, the effects of class and race combine to pull Puerto Ricans and other Hispanics down into the lower educational tracks, which serve as preparation for entry into the secondary labor market. Once ‘finished’ with school, Puerto Ricans and other tracked groups move on to take positions in society similar to those their parents occupied (Rodriguez 1989:131).

Many social scientists agree that education is an integral part in the promotion of equality for Latinos living in the United States. The incorporation of a student’s language and other cultural practices into his/her school’s curricula allows the student to absorb just how appreciated and respected their people and culture truly is. The Hernández School was founded in the 1970’s in response to the large influx of Puerto Ricans to the Boston area.¹⁴ There were absolutely no schools that had, nor recognized the need for, a program that provided Spanish-speaking children educational opportunities. Boston’s desegregation order, actualized by the NAACP in 1974, required the *Hernández* school to integrate into Boston’s school system. Today, children are taught in both the Spanish and English language and learn from a curriculum that honors and celebrates the many cultures (countries) from which they come. A fourth grade English teacher, who has worked at the *Hernández* school for over 19 years, remarks how the school system can get “caught up” in affairs that seem to be more crucial at the moment, and it the responsibility of the teachers to make sure the founding purposes are maintained. “The teachers stick together and ask ‘Please!’, because they [students] *need* a balance [emphasis added].” *Carla* rationalizes

¹⁴ Rafael Hernandez Marin is considered to be the greatest Puerto Rican composer. He is known for writing “Lamento Borincano” (Puerto Rican Lamentation) and “Preciosa” (Precious), two songs that are often referred to as his masterpieces. His music is an important part of Puerto Rican culture because it speaks of the loneliness of moving and having to leave a place that is loved by so many.

the limited number of incidents that have exposed her to racial discrimination as a direct cause of attending a bilingual school.

I wanted to come to a bilingual school or a school that's mixed and not an all white school or an all black school. See 'cause if you go to an all white school, and you're the only Hispanic person there, that's going to change you and make you want to act white and it's going to make you want to be white.

“In a true community, we are to know one another, like one another, [and] help one another” (Lyon 1989:247). Fifteen of the eighteen young women I conversed with are also members of Rosie's youth organization; a folkloric performance group made up of young people who share a passion for traditional songs and dances from the Latin American and Caribbean cultures. Through their endless number of festivals, performances, and trips this organization has seen the lives of many children and young adults change for the better. On the days that the youth don't gather, the organization's space is rented to other community members and organizations for art shows, dances, lectures, and musical performances. This youth organization has a hopeful outlook and emphasizes the Puerto Rican people's potential for victory over discrimination and does so with the participation of these young ladies.

The role family relationships play in providing moral support for these young women has already been discussed in a previous section. An “extended” family network is also considered to be a source of strength, comfort, and encouragement. Many of the young girls express how much they enjoy visiting their family members still living on the island. *Sofía*, who is 11 years old and in the fifth grade, asserts how “it's fun being Puerto Rican because you can go to Puerto Rico and you share the culture.” Although at times, here in the United States, she may feel like an outsider, trips to Puerto Rico allow her to see where her roots have been firmly planted, and experience this great sense of belonging. *Adriana* also has good memories from family trips to

Puerto Rico. This form of unification, *Adriana* speaks of below, provides these adolescent girls the support and strength they need to remain motivated and driven individuals.

Like every single year we have this one thing. Like on July fourth. We go out to this private beach in Puerto Rico and the whole family's there – all the family and we just spend our time - the whole day - as a family. We all meet up and we get in this humongous circle and then we pray. My uncle starts the prayer and then my grandmother is all happy because the whole family is together. And then we go to the beach and spend the whole day by the water.

I recognize that the subsections above on school, community, and contact with the island are not fully developed. I do not feel like I have enough information from my conversations to make conclusions about the specific effects of these social networks. I have decided to mention them, though, in hopes that others will further develop the argument that these social connections *do* in fact produce support and encouragement for young puertorriqueñas living in the United States.

Strategy 2: “*United Yet Apart We Stand: Declaring Their Uniqueness*”

We are invariably bombarded with what appear to be random facts - information that is familiar and unfamiliar - and we often resolve this issue through the use of typologies. Stereotypes partially resemble typologies except that not only are they beliefs we use to categorize people and objects, but are also used to stigmatize and exploit. Although people may appear to accept the assertion that stereotypes are false beliefs based on generalizations of groups, some people continue to portray certain groups stereotypically, relying on their own demeaning labels. Instead of making adjustments to opinions and beliefs, many seek evidence to validate these “biases.” People dislike appearing biased and, therefore, attempt to construct justifications for their beliefs. They do not realize that this very process of justification is being driven by these same biased motives.

Stereotypes are considered to arise when an individual perceives another as an enemy (McCauley 1978). Individuals who are socially stigmatized “choose” as their defense mechanism to form stereotypes that place *others* as inferior and, at the same time, to affirm and legitimate their position (Tajfel & Turner 1986). In other words, people generate and use their stereotypes to reaffirm their value and establish their authority over others. These people are motivated to imagine that they possess a particular trait that entirely distinguishes them from those who are being stereotyped against, and therefore tend to recall instances when their behavior demonstrated this special trait (Sanitioso, Kunda & Fong 1990).

With conviction in their voices, these young puertorriqueñas speak of the substantial differences between Latinos and Whites/Blacks. Many of their statements are stereotypic in nature. These girls attend a bilingual school where they encounter very few White and Black students, and they live in a neighborhood where many of the residents are both Black and living below the poverty level. In describing her community to me, 12 year old *Yesenia* declares “Right now I live in Mattapan and there is a lot of Black people and Dominican people and my neighbors are Dominican and Puerto Rican so I’m fine. But it’s mostly Black.”¹⁵ These young ladies are mainly exposed to Black people who reside in a neighborhood where poverty and delinquency are prevalent, and, consequently, are more inclined to formulate their impressions of Blacks from this one segment of the Black population. Likewise, during our conversations, it becomes more and more obvious to me that these young women rarely interact with White people and therefore, it seems quite reasonable that the opinions these women have formed of

¹⁵ Mattapan is a neighborhood in Boston, MA that has a population of 28,145. This neighborhood consists of public housing, small apartments, and single-family houses. In the 1960’s and 1970’s Mattapan experienced a drastic change in their residents. Redlining, blockbusting, and white flight caused an ethnic transition. Originally, Mattapan was considered a Jewish community, and now its residents are mainly immigrants from Haiti and other Caribbean countries. One of the neighborhood’s main problems is gang violence (www.cityofboston.gov/police/b3.asp).

Whites stem from secondary sources, i.e. their peers, parents, and the mainstream media.¹⁶

These young women do a fine job of not only distinguishing themselves from Whites, Blacks, and the many Latina stereotypes, they also choose to not let these negative biases define who they are. Empowered by this “ability” to cast off all limitations placed upon them by these racial stereotypes, these young ladies are able to construct their *own* self-definitions.

Separating from stereotypes

These young ladies strongly consider the Puerto Rican people a highly unique group, and consider it necessary that others recognize their distinctiveness. Uniqueness signifies the “only one” of a certain thing, and the nonexistence of an equal entity. These young women have determined that disassociation from the “others” helps to distinguish the outstanding traits of the Puerto Rican people. In order to create this distance these young women feel a need to have “rightful” reasons to do so. They justify this distinction by focusing on the negative aspect of each group of people; most of which qualify as stereotypes. There exists a slight contrast between the two methods of labeling utilized by these young women to stereotype Whites and Blacks. This difference in stereotyping may be due to the social position of the two groups. One is considered dominant while the other inferior. Every time the topic of Black people arises the comments are harsh and unfavorable. There is neither hesitation nor uncertainty in their voices when communicating their thoughts. In attempting to explain an incident during which she was discriminated against, *Yesenia* states:

I went to this school where people were mostly from Haiti. I was new so some of the students wouldn't accept me. They would say that she's white that she's not from here and she doesn't know our language. At first I was upset and I didn't

¹⁶ Based on their descriptions of their friendship circles, the students who attend their school, and the people who live in their neighborhoods, I have made the assumption that these girls do not socialize with many White people. I fully recognize that this is an assumption and not a fact that was directly stated by any of the young women.

want to return to the school no more but then when they got to know me it was okay. Sometimes, if I have to go somewhere and it's with my friends who are my skin tone color and there's like – not to be racist – but a lot of black people around I don't like to go cause sometimes they give you looks and they can get mad at you for no reason. I think black people get into a lot of trouble more than white people.

Within Yesenia's account of her experience with direct discrimination, there are a few components I find intriguing. First, she attributes her rejection to her new student status and refrains from making it seem as if her race/ethnicity was the issue. Later in the detailed explanation she addresses skin color as the problem. Hoping I do not form an awful impression of her, *Yesenia* decides to mention her attempt at not sounding racist. Ironically, towards the end of her report, *Yesenia* refers to Black people in a generalized fashion. Something else I am fascinated with is her mention of delinquent behavior as a Black-White problem, and chooses to not include Latinos in the comparison. This decision could be explained by America's tendency to dichotomize race or could be due to her decision to not involve "her people" in any discussion of delinquent behavior. By identifying as a lighter skinned Puerto Rican it's almost as if she constructs herself as a *victim*; someone who isn't able to enjoy something as simple as hanging out with her friends because of the possibility of being attacked.

The notion of Blacks as ill-behaved is a characterization that appears throughout many of the narratives. Both *Yesenia* and *Rosita*, when talking about their parents' dating preferences for their daughters, tell parallel stories.

Yesenia: I wouldn't think about dating a black guy, but if I were my parents would ask a lot of questions and if I didn't know how to answer them...we'd move! [laughs].

Rosita: I won't bring home a black guy...they would probably start asking questions, though. Lot's of questions 'cause they aren't seen as a good choice. Black people are considered like always in the streets, really bad.

Rosita, who is 12 years old and in the seventh grade, claims that a Black guy isn't perceived as a "good choice" for a boyfriend. To put it another way, she and her parents consider Puerto Ricans as a more deserving group of people. Gratification is gained at the mere thought of being part of group that has command over another. Discussions on dating Black men were always accompanied with certainty in their voices of how their parents/guardians would be critical and disapproving of the situation. Many of their negative judgments about Blacks derives from the stereotypes embedded in the opinions of their parents, as well as from the interactions these girls have with the Black people living in their neighborhood.

As mentioned above, these girls rarely interact with white people. As referred to above, when *Yesenia* is asked to express to me her community makeup she quickly responds, "Right now I live in Mattapan and there's a lot of black people and Dominican people." There is no suggestion of many, if any, White people residing in Mattapan. Because the dominant group in the United States is composed of none other than White Americans, they are the ones often displayed positively in mainstream culture. These young women utilize three main sources to create their perceptions of White people: (1) the few White students who attend their school, (2) mainstream media, and (3) their parents/peers. Desiring to appear unique even when being matched with Whites, these young ladies attempt to use the same method they utilize to establish their authority over the Blacks, but instead face a minor challenge. Constantly being exposed to media images that depict White people in a positive light, these young girls may deem it necessary to still hold *some* positive opinions about Whites. Failure to do so would suggest that something is wrong with the way they think. It is difficult to *not* assume "everyone" thinks White people are commendable because, generally speaking, they are often portrayed in the

media as an exceptional group of people. A perfect example of this conflicting view is when *Alicia* begins describing her *few* White friends.

The few friends I have that are white they are all intelligent and everything so they always have their little calendars to schedule everything they do and both of the parents work and they have their own private tutors. [pause] Well white people that I have met their parents have had everything to support them and the people I have met that are white have had all straight A's. I wish I can do that one day. That's one thing that I'm kind of jealous about. Well, at least the Puerto Rican girl can be prettier, and the white person won't know how their background is or anything.

Alicia begins representing her white friends as intelligent, organized, and privileged. After expressing her jealousy of their grades, she feels a sudden need to reaffirm the areas in which Puerto Ricans' appear more favorable than Whites. She decides to speak about physical appearance and cultural awareness. These young women pride themselves in their culture and perceive it as essential to fully understand oneself. Their belief that that most White people have lost their cultural connections, or have no interest in identifying with their cultural roots, provides these young women the chance to stress their uniqueness. In response to a series of questions, *Yesenia* makes a similar comment about the difference between a Latina and a White girls' physical appearance.

Me: Do you think the Puerto Rican girl would be prettier than the white girl?

Yesenia: I actually think so. Some of my friends here – some of them were Latinas and then there were whites here. And people kept saying the Latinas were prettier than the white people.

Me: Why do you think so?

Yesenia: Well I don't actually know but some people were saying that Latinas have more of a body and they see white people with blonde hair and they don't like blonde hair.

The first response I receive is from *Yesenia* is stated in first person. Then when the question is directed at her again, she decides to focus more on what "some people" think rather than her personal opinions. I understand this switch to be an important detail of her response because it

appears as if she realizes that relating the comment of Puerto Rican girls as prettier to *others* seems to make the observation more reliable and, therefore, “true.” These young ladies appear to have one motive in mind when commenting on Whites, and *Esmeralda* puts it best when she ends our conversation with “They only talk English, they dress differently, they act different. They think something a different way then we do.” It is this difference that allows them to reinforce their uniqueness.

These young puertorriqueñas not only strive to highlight their separation from “others” but also exert an enormous amount of energy to illustrate how Latina stereotypes do not apply to their lives. Although they acknowledge their existence, they deny any personal relation to them. This process of stereotype rejection is best illustrated by *Carla’s* assertion on the opinions of White people.

Well Latinas, they [white people] think that we are hoes and we sleep around with all guys and we show our bodies to everyone and that’s kind of not true. Some of them do that but not all. [pause] The thing that I least like about my personality is my very bad temper. And plus most people picture Puerto Ricans as the bad tempered ones, the loud mouths and that’s the kind of thing that I hate cause I’m a bad tempered person and I’m a loud mouth and like so they see it as the stereotype and I don’t want to fit the stereotype. I want to be different from that. The best thing is my intelligence because my intelligence can bring me wherever I want to go because they picture us as stupid people and if they see that I’m smart and a Latino woman they are going to see “Oh I guess not all of them are like that.” ‘Cause some of them – not to disgrace my people – but some of them are like really stupid and I’m like oh no you don’t do that. They’re going to think bad of us.

Although I have decided to use *Carla’s* comment as the main example, many of the young ladies do not discount the Latina stereotypes as *just* stereotypes, nor do they speak of them as “truth.” Instead, they react to these negative generalizations by separating themselves from the few who, unfortunately, *do* fit the stereotype. During our second conversation together, *Marcela* tells me “Some [Puerto Ricans girls] wear a lot of short skirts and stuff. I don’t wear that though. I wear

them to about here,” pointing to the area directly above her knees. This refusal to absorb the negative stereotypes of Puerto Rican girls illustrates the attempt of these young women to control how they are perceived by others.

The process of self-defining

The explanation of how people attribute their behavior to either internal or external causes is referred to by social psychologists as “attribution theory.” *Attribution theory* assumes that people focus on the attributions that are expected to boost their self-worth. These attributions are then described as originating from internal causes. These young women do not compete with others nor do they define themselves by the Latina stereotypes that continue to have a strong presence in our society. Their personal strengths are attributed to individual hard work and accomplishment; which, in turn, is what defines who they are. Although, initially it may seem as if *Josefina* and *Raquel* (12 year old) respond to the question “Who Am I?” in very opposite ways, their responses actually share a common aspect.

Josefina: I know that I can do the best that I can with working and moving on with my life and I nothing is going to stop me from doing that because I make my own decisions.

Raquel: I am Latin, Spanish, I’m smart, well educated. I describe myself as being beautiful, being different, danceful, joyful.

At first, *Raquel*’s response seems to be very specific, in nature, while *Josephina*’s is a bit more general. Yet, in both of the answers, there exists this underlying determination to not only think of oneself as a motivated and unique individual, but to live a life where this desire is practiced in one’s daily behaviors, actions, and thoughts. Both responses stress the importance of acting on one’s beliefs, needs, and wants. These young women are neither passive nor reactive beings. They are all assertive, passionate, and high-spirited women who have learned the importance of establishing their *own* self-definitions.

Strategy 3: “¡Wepa!: The Power of Puerto Rican Pride”

Cultural pride is not an emotion these young women acquire, possess, or retain; it is something they *are*. The admiration they express for their cultural heritage is intertwined in their self identities. It is the quality that defines their aspirations, strengths, and values. Claiming ownership over something that symbolizes the preservation of passion, unity, and community allegiance perpetuates feelings of empowerment and dominion over their lives. These young women recognize and appreciate their cultural freedom, and strive to find the positive within themselves, their community, and *la raza* (their people). During one of my conversations with seventh grader *Sarita*, I decide to inquire about the time she experienced discrimination because of her cultural heritage. Earlier in the conversation, *Sarita* had briefly mentioned an incident that involved ridicule and hurt feelings. While attempting to explain that I completely understood and respected her decision if she chose to not disclose any information about the incident, *Sarita* interjected with her story.

People were making fun of Puerto Ricans – the way they talk- and that made me mad and you know how I said they talk really loud and in our classes there’s more Dominicans and Dominicans think they are sometimes better and sometimes I think I don’t want to be Puerto Rican. I think that at that time so people won’t make fun of me, people won’t talk about me.

Although what occurs next in our conversation may seem as a simple change in subject to many, it was something that resonated deeply with me. It could just have been her noticeable change in posture or the smile that quickly emerged on her face as she continued speaking. *Sarita* points to the nearest window where just months before the Puerto Rican festival was held.

I could see my culture and everyone from my culture and have fun singing, dancing, seeing all the beautiful things and thinking not only do Puerto Ricans have bad things but they have good things too. At festivals we can see how Puerto

Rican people can be famous and can achieve their dreams. Singers, dancers, and musicians.

For a short while, *Sarita* allows others' judgments and criticisms to discourage her, to cause her to feel so low that she wishes to abandon her culture; something that has helped her to define who she is as an individual person, and a person who is part of *a people*, for many years. At the Puerto Rican festival *Sarita* witnessed the unification of *a people* who devoted the time and energy to celebrate the vibrant and spirited culture they proudly call theirs. She was quickly reminded of the endless possibilities available to her because of the support and unification that exists in her community. Although *Carla* comments on a similar experience, the manner in which she says she addressed the issue is slightly different. An animated *Carla* declares:

"Oh Puerto Ricans are loud and crazy people" and "They don't know how to control their kids", "They're so stupid" and stuff like that gets me upset cause I'm Puerto Rican and to hear people talking – cause not all Puerto Ricans are the same. Some are like that. Some people are just crazy and drink a lot and party all the time. But that's like some people not all people. It's just being very stereotypical. I am very proud of who I am and what I am and what I represent. I'm very proud of who I am and no one can put me down cause I'm Puerto Rican and people can look and they can talk what they want but it don't bother me. Cause things that people say doesn't bother me unless it's true it won't get to me. Like when I get in arguments with people sometimes they bring up the fact that I'm Puerto Rican and they'll say something about Puerto Ricans and it won't bother me but I'll get upset because they don't know what they talking about.

By understanding what it means to identify as a Puerto Rican and valuing what she represents, *Carla* is able to prevent the comments and actions of the ignorant from altering her perceptions. It is not the actual comments of "some people" that angers *Carla*, it is the act of speaking without substance that causes her to react. Exactly how many of these young women do not get annoyed or even outraged at others' narrow-mindedness is best illustrated in *Josefina's* comment on the Puerto Rican culture.

Me living here, I still feel like I'm Latin and not really American because my family taught me a lot of things from the Puerto Rican culture and that makes me feel like nobody should be able to judge me.

The cultural awareness and knowledge these young ladies have received from their family and community provides them as sense of empowerment and the strength to be successful. They are secure with themselves and what they represent. They refuse to allow the ignorance of others to interfere with their futures.

Requiring respect

Many may assume that these girls are satisfied with being culturally informed and demonstrating their cultural pride when required to. On the contrary, these young women recognize that simply sharing the physical environment or educational facilities with others is not enough. They value their cultural beliefs and practices and expect everyone to respect their uniqueness. As *Carla* explains:

Well I say the Puerto Rican people sometimes we can be a little crazy. But we like to gain respect a lot from everybody and especially from our kids. If we don't get respect from our kids we'd be very upset with our children. We train ourselves to be respected.

In the Latino culture, respect is the foundation for any social relationship. For example, a Puerto Rican custom is to introduce oneself using one's last name. This formality illustrates the respect and admiration the Puerto Rican people have for their parents and ancestors. These young ladies were raised, as *Carla* makes clear, to respect others and demand that others respect them. The disappointment of not receiving the respect that they are raised to demand and expect is best illustrated in the following report of an incident that happened in the classroom.

Sometimes in computer class like the teacher she treats the Puerto Rican and Dominican kids like they're the bad ones. Like the American ones, they do stuff and they don't get in trouble for it. So if I do something she gets me in trouble. Like that's messed up because they aren't any different from us. *It makes me feel*

bad cause like I really don't care about her but she don't need to treat people differently. I think she's racist. I don't know. I think she don't like Puerto Rican or Dominican people. Probably cause they just hating. They could learn Spanish but they don't try to because they think it's just stupid to learn Spanish. But como dice la gente (like people say) you got two different languages – it's worth more.

Disrespect has been found to affect a person's understanding of the self and can be a very humiliating experience. Respect is a necessary aspect of social interactions because it fosters connections and, in effect, decreases the amount of anxiety felt by the individuals involved. According to Buttny & Williams, "Rom Harre (1980)...outlines respect as 'a socially marked relation, shown by deference' to others; it is 'more than an attitude and not necessarily linked to an emotion. Respect, and its opposite, contempt, are public displays which are shown and ritually symbolically marked in the course of particular activities of daily life'" (110). Respect is communicated through an individual's actions and many symbols of disrespect are often quite subtle and ambiguous. Most White people are privileged enough to take respect for granted while minorities have to constantly prove they are worthy of receiving respect from others (Omi and Winant 1994). Therefore, disrespect is another way of advocating and promoting racism. *Esmeralda* makes this connection between her teacher's actions and feelings. She attributes her computer teacher's disrespect and unfairness to her racist nature. Finally, *Esmeralda's* decision to end her story on a more uplifting point is worthy of discussion. She chooses to conclude her account of the incident by claiming that her culture is "worth more" than the value that's placed on it by her teacher. Confronting an issue with the frame of mind that *Carla* and *Esmeralda* do is often difficult when first faced with the problem. *Alicia* expresses the frustration she feels when she is forced to stand up for what she believes in.

Well my mom is kind of a tough woman and when she said she used to tell me that every time someone hits you, hit them back. She is a very tough person and she said she used to be a tough girl when she was young. I know I'm not supposed to be afraid of anyone but its sometimes hard to stand up for yourself

but I know I have to do it because it's what I believe in and it's what I should do because I know after I do it I will feel better about myself.

These young women have been taught to always be prepared for difficult situations. Making the right choices are not always the easiest decisions and Alicia realizes this. Although these young girls may find it difficult to remain strong in the face of adversity they realize that the real prize is obtained once the battle has been fought and won; namely, "feeling better about [themselves]."

Educating others

These young women take pride in their culture and people, and truly value their roots. They do not deserve nor accept anything but the highest of respect for their history of struggle and survival. Respect is their most basic demand. Many of these young ladies strongly believe that real communication and trust *must* be developed if we are to solve the problems produced by inequality in the United States. At the end of our second conversation together, I ask *Rosita* if there is anything else she would like to say, either about a topic we touched upon earlier or on an issue she feels should be discussed. She pauses and then slowly responds:

Rosita: Some people say us Latinos are the worst people and have the worst culture but that's not true. I disagree. Some of us make bad choices but if you think about it white people if they have...for jobs – umm I read in an article us Latinos we take any job that can keep us living but white people, if it's not enough income, they leave it there for us to take. I think that that's wrong. Us Latinos we seem different because we are teenagers and we just want to have fun and some of us don't finish school and just drop out and then we realize "Oh I should've stayed in school!" And then we have to work harder. It's not like all Latinos do that but some do. And people assume because one person did that most do.

Me: What are some things you think we can do, as Latinos, to change this?

Rosita: Finish school so we can show them. I told my friends.

These women realize that change needs to happen if they plan on leading successful lives. They are determined to raise the level of expectations placed on Latinas in the United States, and will not stop until this has been fully accomplished.

Strategy 4: “*Freedom of Choice*: Understanding Their Social Contexts”

These young women are living at the borders of two distinct cultures: Puerto Rican/Latino and American. As expressed in earlier sections, they are well aware of the discrimination towards and stereotyping of Latinos. Having constructed part of their identities around their Puerto Rican roots, they recognize that they may never be considered “American.” These young women have, therefore, strengthened their ties to the culture that provides them the most support, encouragement, and affection. Seventeen of the eighteen young ladies I conversed with preferred the label Puerto Rican to American. They define themselves in national terms in order to affirm and emphasize those things that make them distinguishable as a separate people in the United States. Many of these young women understand race as a two-tiered hierarchy - Whites and everyone else living in America. Often “being White” is equated with “being American.” Understanding that they are a part of the American population, they do what is necessary to incorporate themselves into the larger social system. These young ladies are fully aware of the limits imposed on them yet continue to strive for the acknowledgement and respect they rightfully deserve. These ladies share with me, through their many stories, the difficulty of achieving upward mobility. In the following excerpt, *Ines* expresses how she deals with the challenge of being both Puerto Rican and American.

Sometimes I feel like I need to change because of the places that I go. Nobody talks Spanish so I tell them that I am American and like so they won't think that I am the only Latina. Yeah cause sometimes I feel left out when I tell people that I am Latina and nobody else is. I won't be able to talk to nobody.

At first it seems as if she is speaking of these identity transitions as necessary and, therefore, unpleasant. *Ines* often feels like an outsider in places where she is surrounded by people who only speak English and feels forced to speak English to fit in. She has learned, though, that by

not choosing to sometimes identify with one culture over another she isn't "able to talk to nobody." While *Ines* is referring to language barriers her comment makes general reference to cultural misunderstandings. The failure to adapt often result in miscommunication, conflict, and rejection. *Ines* is aware of these possibilities and attempts to minimize their occurrences by sometimes choosing to downplay her Latin cultural roots. This recognition of her ability to identify with certain cultural components, depending on the social context, is also revealed in *Carla* remarks on the American job market.

Since I'm part of American, I was born and raised here, they would probably give me more opportunity because they see that I can be am more Americanized – not with my Puerto Rican culture and all that stuff - so they'd probably give me a more better chance to have a good job because when a Hispanic person reaches like to the top level it's like they're all hero for everybody – everybody always looks up to them and says I wish I could be there. So that people are not putting us down and it kind of helps a little because the white people see "Oh this person is higher in status than us and they are Hispanic which means that not all of them are bad so --."

Carla understands the discrimination that exists in America's institutions and its affects on the minorities who are eagerly seeking upward mobility. Having fully recognized this unfortunate situation *Carla* shares with me her solution for dealing with this problem. She expects to take advantage of her "American-side" by identifying with the American culture in contexts that she realizes aren't always favorable towards Hispanics. What she specifically means by "Americanized" remains unclear, although possibilities include language, style of dress, and ways of behaving. *Marcela* is also aware of the benefits of having this "fluid-like" identity as illustrated in the following excerpt.

I see here that we have more freedom. But my grandmother was born and raised in Puerto Rico and she's seen her mom do the same thing so she feels that she should do the same thing so I'm like you can't do that. We are living in the United States now it's not the same.

The richness of *Marcela's* comment lies precisely in her ability to incorporate the histories and experiences of her great grandmother, grandmother, and her own into a discussion of generational differences; differences she labels as “freedom.” Many of these young women recognize the variations in their experiences, as a result of having been born in the United States compared to those born on the island. Although they continue to struggle for social justice, they experience a feeling of “liberation” knowing that the fluid-nature of biculturalism allows them to get that much closer to attaining equality in America.

CONCLUSION

I began this project hoping to provide these young women with the opportunity to experience emancipation. Having read article after article and book after book on the endless number of challenges Latinos living in the United States are forced to cope with (i.e. poverty, lack of education, high crime neighborhoods, racial/ethnic discrimination, increase in female headed households, overcrowded housing, unemployment, etc.), I began wondering what additional problems are faced by second and third generation Puerto Rican American girls living in the city of Boston. Other possible concerns included gender oppression, the affects of colonialism, being a U.S. citizen while often viewed as a foreigner by “others,” and cultural clashes. I was focusing exclusively on the “difficult lives” of these young ladies. Many would probably ask me why I, a third generation Puerto Rican American woman, could be so surprised while exploring all of the issues raised in the social science research. My thought process went as followed: Although I was raised in a two parent household located in a mainly Caucasian suburban neighborhood, was privileged to earn an undergraduate degree, and am now a graduate student at a well-known college, I found life to be quite difficult growing up. Initially,

recognizing the differences between the adolescent life I led and the lives of these girls generated feelings of sympathy.

I spent many hours contemplating the structure of this research project attempting to understand how I could initiate dialogue and help produce change in the lives of these young women, as well as in the realm of academia. When I speak of “dialogue and change” I am suggesting that, as a privileged sociologist, I wanted to motivate and energize these young women to begin recognizing and “knowing” reality with the hopes that change would soon occur. The stories of these strong women led me to adopt another agenda: to *just* listen.

These young women were “emancipated” even before they stepped foot into the small music room located in the back of the school’s auditorium. By emancipation I am not suggesting that the oppression, violence, and hostility of their history do not continue to influence their present lives, because its effects are still felt. The problems I mentioned earlier are still alive and continue to challenge the lives of these young women on a daily basis. The Merriam Webster dictionary defines *emancipation* as the “release from restraint, control, or the power of another.” These young women recognize the obstacles that have been set before them, and choose to not allow these challenges to control their identities. They define who they as a people.

By writing on the ways these women cope with life’s problems I am not, in any way, disregarding the issues nor lessening their influence. These problems need to be addressed by every American, not just these young Puerto Rican American women. A shift in the mentality of the American people needs to occur, from thinking individualistically to thinking on a grander scale.

I have chosen to title this paper “An Unwritten Narrative: The Resilience of Young Puerto Rican American Girls.” There is no question that the oppressive history of Puerto Ricans

has been written about. This has provided Americans the opportunity to acknowledge the struggles Puerto Ricans have fought and continue to fight against, using all of their abilities, resources, and strength. Recognizing what has been done and what still needs to be completed, helps bring the Puerto Rican people living in the United States to center stage. The first Puerto Ricans to migrate to the United States were undeterred by the situation on the island and determined to better the lives of their families. The second and third generations of Puerto Rican Americans have been able to survive the great adversities but not without struggles that have sometimes scarred them in the process. The intensity, devotion, and commitment that these young women fight with is worthy of discussion. The oppressiveness of their history has been recorded, analyzed, discussed, and, often, used to predict aspects of their futures. What has remained virtually unwritten, until now, are the ways young puertorriqueñas have learned to cope with these problems. The skills these young women have acquired go beyond anything one can learn in grade, secondary, or even graduate school. As social scientists we earn the title of sociologist, doctor, anthropologist, professor, researcher, or psychologist by simply *studying* what these young women *experience* first hand every single day of their lives. These astonishingly powerful experiences deserve to be described and shared with those living beyond the boundaries of their Puerto Rican community. That has been the intent and goal of this thesis.

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